

WHITE SCREEN, BLACK MASKS : OTHELLO AND THE  
PERFORMATIVITY OF RACE ON STAGE AND SCREEN

Daniel Roy Connelly

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD  
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Performativity of Race on Stage and Film

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to expose stereotypologies of black African skin as performed on the Shakespearean stage and before the Shakespearean camera. My research engages with a number of Tudor/Stuart travel narratives and plays containing imperialistic denigrations of Negritude. To accompany these early revelations of the 'unknown' black Other, I effect a close performative and historical consideration of Shakespeare's *Othello* (1602). By critiquing the repetitive containment of the character of Othello, the Moor, by successive theatrical ideologies, I work towards a full analysis of his twentieth-century representation on film. Here, through positioning myself within contextual, postcolonial, and methodological discourses surrounding representations of *Othello* by Orson Welles (1952), Stuart Burge (1965), and five other directors from 1981 to the present day, I confirm and analyse the politicisation of both genuine and masked blackness. In asserting that Welles's ninety-minute statement is powerfully emancipated from white ideological constraint, I nonetheless conclude that the Elizabethan and Jacobean tropes employed in dramatic formulations of black skin retain powerful visual significance within the contemporary film industries that interpret Shakespeare's Moor of Venice.

I, Daniel Roy Connelly, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 94,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

22<sup>nd</sup> September 2003 .....

I was admitted as a research student in September 2000 and as a candidate for the degree of PhD. in September 2000; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 2000 and 2003.

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With all daddy's love to Sebastian and Adrianna: *per aspera ad astra*.

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St. Orgne stood the morning and asked: What is this life I see? Is this dark damnation of color real? Or simply mine own imagining? Can it be true that souls wrapped in black-velvet have a destiny different from those swathed in white satin, or yellow silk, when all these coverings are fruit of the same worm, and threaded by the same hands? Or must I, ignoring all seeming difference, rise to some upper realm where there is no color, no race, sex, wealth nor age, but all men stand equal under the sun?

W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Revelation of St. Orgne the Damned*

He jumps off the white body,  
jerks the knife from his black chest,  
and in seconds snatches  
the pillow off, sees  
her face and flees  
the bedroom backwards  
and so on through the levitating  
handkerchief that shoots  
into the lady's hand  
and the mangy sidekick  
who finally quits nipping  
at the general's sore ear.  
I take my thumb off REW  
trying to stop on soul's joy  
well met at Cyprus  
but the blind worm  
once more snakes forward,  
luminous,  
heading the wrong way.

Max Keith Sutton, *Rewinding 'Othello'*

Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished.

(Pause.)

Grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there's a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap.

(Pause.)

I can't be punished any more.

Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*

**Introduction**  
**The First-World Moor**

If thou be wise, as wise thou art, and wilt be ruled by me,  
Live still at home, and covet not those barbarous coasts to see.  
No good befalls a man that seeks, and finds no better place,  
No civil customs to be learned, where God bestows no grace.<sup>1</sup>

The closing couplets of George Turberville's crafty world-weariness held all the answers for the armchair explorer in 1568. Having described the Russians as a people 'passing rude, to vices vile inclined', whose 'wanton' folk are 'so full of guile', Turberville's advice seems perfectly acceptable: put your faith in the fraught traveller and let him do the dirty work for you. But also within Turberville's roughly one-hundred-line poem, there lies the following, admmissive quartet, which tends to undermine the credibility of our wandering Virgil: 'I write not all I know, I touch but here and there, / For if I should, my pen would pinch, and eke offend I fear. / Who shall so shall read this verse, conjecture of the rest, / And think by reason of our trade, that I do think the best'.

What Turberville had alighted upon was the realisation that the power of the unknown lies in the telling, and because it was unknown the telling could be tailored any which way; there was money to be had from preventing the 'pinch', fame to be found in the art of race creation. In this way were drawn the pictures of strangers in strange lands. For Turberville, the nadir of Otherness was incivility and Godlessness; the consequent images, limited by this scope, then came to be circulated among the literate classes.

Words like Turberville's went a long way to sating an Elizabethan appetite eager for information about other cultures and peoples and joined an extending line of eclectic epistemologies, each of which claimed its credibility because of the pre-existing dearth of global knowledge. It is these origins of belief that I will use to commence this thesis, so as to unearth the social mindset from which black skin, 'the primary histrionic signification of racial otherness in Renaissance court and

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<sup>1</sup> From 'Letters in verse, written by Master George Turberville out of Moscovy, 1568, to certain friends of his in London', cited in Hakluyt's *Voyages and Discoveries*, ed. Jack Beeching (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), pp. 129-32.

public theatre<sup>2</sup> came, in the figure of the black-skinned Moor, to be produced on the London stage in the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries, and to determine if and why the period's dramatists 'were likely to express without much modification the popular ideas and attitudes toward black men generally held by the white culture'.<sup>3</sup> By gathering and understanding tropes attributable to performative black skin, I will then go on to track the stage and filmic presentation of Shakespeare's *Othello*. My need here of the Moor is to determine whether (or not) a succession of dominant, white, Anglo-American ideologies have carried these unresisting, disseminable attitudes into the modern arena of film, where black representation is largely policed by the white man, who would thereby create on the back of my nation's Poet self-fulfilling prophecies of racial power.

Tokson's 'popular ideas' are stereotypes, or what Ania Loomba calls 'common-sense ideas about black'. In white knowledge of black people, stereotypes are 'based on simplification and generalization, or the denial of individuality';<sup>4</sup> they exploit the gap between known and unknown, filling empty pores to the point that the locus of observation is revealed in both its mythological and essential form. The former is then subsumed into the knowledge bases that circulate around the latter. Jan Nederveen Pieterse asserts that 'though they may have no basis in reality, stereotypes are real in their social consequences, notably with regard to the allocation of roles'.<sup>5</sup> This is a thesis in which roles and stereotypes will abound and confound in tandem with the progress through time of a fictitious stage creation. The tension that arises with the need to promulgate the stereotypical will be an apt measure of *Othello*'s racialisation through time.

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<sup>2</sup> Dympna Callaghan, "'Othello was a white man": properties of race on Shakespeare's Stage', in *Alternative Shakespeares* Volume 2, ed. Terence Hawkes (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 196.

<sup>3</sup> Elliot H. Tokson, *The Popular Image of the Black Man in English Drama, 1550-1688* (Boston, Mass.: G. K. Hall and Co., 1982), p. 136.

<sup>4</sup> Ania Loomba, *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1989), p. 48.

<sup>5</sup> Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 11. In offering the reader a pictorial historicisation of the black African figure, from Madonna portraiture to jam jars, Pieterse tracks a range of visual imagery and its concomitant social function. Of matters gross and gaping, Pieterse alerts us to a specific stereotype, from the sixteenth-century Low Countries, of the 'gaping' Moor, 'usually in a turban and with a dark face', as a trade sign on Apothecaries' shops, referencing 'medicinal herbs which originate in the Orient' (p. 189). The sign is still common today.

Frantz Fanon, the Antillean analyst whose treatises on the fragility of the colonised mind will inform my twentieth-century work, argues that stereotypes issue from within the 'arsenal of complexes...developed by the colonial environment'.<sup>6</sup> To arrive at this conclusion, Fanon transposes for us the results of some friendly word association banter he had had with white European colleagues. He asked which words came to mind when they saw black men: 'Biology, penis, strong, athletic, potent, boxer. . .savage, animal, devil, sin', came the replies.<sup>7</sup> With heavy irony, Fanon here exposes the very essence of stereotype: the type is of 'perpetual myth-making', which circulates, is given credibility, and comes to be used as a stick with which to beat the unknown.

The stability of his colleagues' responses is paradoxically bound together with the irregularities inherent in Western knowledge of the other. In defining this dialectic, Fanon might be speaking for Elizabethan writers, in that 'exoticism...allows no cultural confrontation. There is on the one hand a culture in which qualities of dynamism, of growth, of depth can be recognized. As against this, we find characteristics, curiosities, things, never a structure'.<sup>8</sup> The opposition between a static, knowable centre and a fluctuating, dark satellite is further observed by Homi Bhabha, one of Fanon's successors, whom I will call upon throughout this thesis:

An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness... Likewise the stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated... as if the essential duplicity of the Asiatic or the bestial sexual licence of the African that needs no proof, can never really, in discourse, be proved.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Black Skin, White Masks* [1952], tr. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1982), p. 30. I am further indebted to Fanon in my choice of title for this thesis.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>8</sup> 'Racism and Culture', in *Toward the African Revolution*, tr. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 66. In a chapter entitled 'The Ambivalence of Bhabha', Robert Young provides a strong reading of Bhabha's commitment to exposing the equivocations of colonial discourse. See *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 141-56.

It is worth recalling that common-sense ideas are the very things with which we as audience confront drama, as a measure of our own ways, and *Othello*, perhaps uniquely, 'is the text that will at once unsettle and fill in, substantiate and resolve what the audience suspects it already knows about the essence of blackness as the savage and libidinous Other'.<sup>10</sup>

As received four-hundred years ago, the popular ideas that circulated around the black image were of an inherent lack of trustworthiness, of unbounded sexual profligacy and the concomitant fear of blemished bloodlines, and of a diabolic provenance (including bodily difference), whose earthly intention was to disrupt the political practices of the white patriarchy. The confluence of the stereotype and the representative Othello were set out anonymously in the next century:

'[Shakespeare] has frightened us... with a real Spectacle of a wise and worthy Man made mad by jealousy, and becoming a wild, ungovernable, brutal and blood-thirsty Monster'.<sup>11</sup> Our correspondent discerns what is to become the *sine qua non* of Othello representation over the ensuing period: that the African, identical in bodily form to his commentators, but oppositional in colour, could be so readily transformed firstly into a dramatic hero, and secondly into something uncontrollable and inhuman.

In the era of Othello's conception, the representation of black skin alongside a green but growing knowledge of the thing-in-itself contained powerful, overlapping significations for audiences and bearer alike.<sup>12</sup> Of its external, totalising potential, Dympna Callaghan recalls that 'the capacity of blackness simultaneously to intensify, subsume and absorb all aspects of Otherness is a specifically Renaissance configuration of Othering',<sup>13</sup> while in his seminal work in the arena of Elizabethan exoticisation, G.K. Hunter concludes that 'in Elizabethan drama before *Othello*,

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<sup>10</sup> Arthur L. Little Jr., *Shakespeare Jungle Fever: National-Imperial Re-Visions of Race, Rape, and Sacrifice* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 75.

<sup>11</sup> 'An Enquiry into the nature of the Passions, and Manner in which they are represented by the Tragick Poets, particularly with respect to Jealousy; including some observations on *Shakespeare's Othello*', unsigned, from *The Museum*, No. 38, 29 August, 1747, in *Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage, 1623-1801*, ed. Brian Vickers, vol. 3 (Routledge & Kegan Paul: London and Boston, 1974-1981), p. 210.

<sup>12</sup> For an interesting article on early-modern artistic tropings of black and white, see Peter Erickson, 'Representations of blacks and blackness in the Renaissance', in *Criticism* 35 (1993): 499-527.

<sup>13</sup> "'Othello was a white man'", p. 196.

there are no Moor figures who are not either foolish or wicked... [thus] illustrat[ing] the normal dramatic expectations of a man whose colour reveals his villainy as (quite literally) of the deepest dye'.<sup>14</sup> The consequence of such a powerful coding extended from the stage to the street outside, since 'one of the central elements in *Othello* and in Shakespeare's England was that a man's colour did matter – at least if he were black – for it was the key to most of his social relationships'.<sup>15</sup>

From this position it becomes possible to consider the consequences of the origins of Elizabethan *Apartheid*, both performatively and politically. Of *Othello*, Ben Okri's synoptic is useful: 'If it did not begin as a play about race, then its history has made it one'.<sup>16</sup> One who has traced that specific history, Ania Loomba, argues that if we are to make further incisions in Okri's statement, 'the notion of race must transcend the black presence in the plays'.<sup>17</sup> Elsewhere, Michael Neill delivers perhaps the most articulate discussion of the import of race both within and to the play:

To talk about race in *Othello* is to fall into anachronism; yet not to talk about it is to ignore something fundamental about a play that has rightly come to be identified as a foundational text in the emergence of modern European racial consciousness – a play that trades in constructions of human difference at once misleadingly like and confusingly unlike those twentieth-century notions to which they are nevertheless recognizably ancestral.<sup>18</sup>

What I aim to do in this thesis is to pick up these critics' cudgels and attempt an archaeology of Neill's constructions, both in and by performance of black skin, whether as mask or man.

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<sup>14</sup> 'Elizabethans and Foreigners', in *Dramatic Identities and Cultural Tradition: Studies in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1978), p. 9. The 'foreigners' relevant to Hunter's disquisition are chiefly European and their connections to Elizabethan London commercial. In 'Othello and Colour Prejudice' (Hunter, 1978), pp. 31-59, Hunter goes on to catalogue the biblical, ancient, and medieval connections between the colour black and black skin.

<sup>15</sup> James Walvin, *The Negro and English Society, 1555-1945* (London: Alien Lane, 1973), pp. 26-7.

<sup>16</sup> Ben Okri, 'Leaping out of Shakespeare's Terror: Five Meditations on *Othello*', in *A Way of Being Free* (London: Phoenix, 1997), p. 72.

<sup>17</sup> Ania Loomba, 'The Color of Patriarchy', in *Women, "Race," and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, eds. Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 26. The fact that race has abandoned the scare-quotes is in itself a mark of progress.

<sup>18</sup> "'Mulattos," "Blacks," and "Indian Moors": "Othello" and early modern constructions of human difference', in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 49 (1998): 362.

To Daniel Vitkus, the Elizabethan instantiation of Negrophobia came as a result of a 'violent contradiction' within early modern English culture: '[T]he old forces of ethnocentric, sectarian and nationalistic feeling produced a...repulsion for the alien, while at the same time the attractive forces of colonial land, valuable commodities and the general appeal of the exotic drew English culture out to mix with other cultures beyond their shores'.<sup>19</sup> My initial scope will be to read some telegrams sent home by the traveller and attempt to comprehend how these missives gave rise to the exotic mythologies which characterised the creation of the Tudor/Stuart African. Virginia Mason Vaughan proposes that 'to the Elizabethan mind, black skin...denoted extreme Otherness, with overlays of satanic propensity and sexual perversion',<sup>20</sup> which allows me to interrogate black racial myth-making and to ask whether Elizabethan and then Jacobean representations were indeed as monolithic and as unforgiving as those of their classical originators, or were theatrical statements made via, say, 'foiling', or gendering of character, that favoured balance and proportion, that destabilised the expectation of white dominance? In other words, I wish initially to assess the foundation and theatrical promulgation of black stereotypes in Shakespeare's time, how this was done, by whom, and in line with what, if any, ideological agendas.

My time span in Chapter I will cover drama that contains representations of blackness from the commencement of Shakespeare's fledgling circulations in London, which I take to be around the time of Robert Greene's *Alphonsus of Aragon* of 1587. Thereafter, via a number of plays, masques, and pageantry, I will seek an eclectic, strong, linking, and ultimately unstable theatrical and social cognisance of black skin until the 1623 publication of the First Folio, the initial and instigating volume dedicated entirely to drama and the authoritative and landmark statement of theatrical practice and understanding of its day. The foregoing historicism becomes necessary as I work towards the centre of this thesis: that the 'paradigms' set in motion in the early modern era have become set in 'motion

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<sup>19</sup> Daniel J. Vitkus, 'The circulation of bodies: slavery, maritime commerce and English captivity narratives in the early modern period', in *Colonial and Postcolonial Incarceration*, ed. Graeme Harper (London and New York: Continuum, 2001), p. 23.

<sup>20</sup> *Othello: a contextual history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 53-4.

picture' in the modern period and continue, largely, unabated. Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Blacknesse* (1605), which I will examine alongside Thomas Middleton's *The Triumph of Truth* (1613), is a good example of the areas of subjection attended to by artists of the creating period and gives me the opportunity to explain my methodology.

Rebecca Anna Bach asks that we 'attend to imperial references in masques and that, even when those references bear on a particular context, we must take them broadly if we are to understand England's new self-definition as a colonial power against its various others'.<sup>21</sup> Bach effected her thesis in 'New World' contexts with regard to Ben Jonson's *The Irish Masque at Court* (1613), *For the Honour of Wales* (1619), *News from the New World Discovered in the Moon* (1620), and *The Gypsies Metamorphosed* (1621); the stark conclusion of her excellent chapter is that 'the alien is naturalized and thereby neutralised'.<sup>22</sup>

Andrew Murphy's interest in 'proximate Otherness' in regard to Jonson's rhetorical 'schtab' at Irishness in *The Irish Masque* leads us into a parallel structure within which Murphy describes 'the mechanism of union...[where] proximity leads to the unexpected recognition of sameness within presumed difference...[and] union actively seeks for sameness within difference and purports to promote the fostering of that commonality so that difference is finally elided'. But the whole is a sham, 'entirely bogus', for 'in each case a predetermined sense of sameness always lies beneath the superimposed marker of difference'.<sup>23</sup> To the Irish, who could only be impugned with difficulty on grounds of colour, these differences were clothing and dialect; to the African, the same valencing obtains, though with hue at its core. Murphy draws the implication that '[in the *Irish Masque*] an underlying English identity can be brought out by the force of the British King's gaze...to the extent

<sup>21</sup> "'Ty Good Shubshects": The Jacobean Masque as Colonial Discourse', in *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, vol. 7, ed. Leeds Barroll (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1995), p. 207.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

<sup>23</sup> *But the Irish Sea Betwixt Us: Ireland, Colonialism, and Renaissance Literature* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999), p. 144. Murphy calls upon Charles Kingsley's description of the Irish as 'White Chimpanzees' to evidence the unstable codings that described not only the Irish but, by simian reference, the African also.

that the outer shell that constitutes Irish difference can be broken and dispersed'.<sup>24</sup> Although the African is visibly separated from the Irish, Jonson's earlier *Masque of Blacknesse* promotes the same monarchic mesmerics explained in Murphy's work.

I will engage with these critics by focussing on the structural ideologies inherent within Jonson's creation of white through the embracement of black in *The Masque of Blacknesse* (1605), which title itself Stephen Orgel sees 'as paradoxical, for blackness is a quality antithetical to the court, symbolic source of light and beauty'.<sup>25</sup> A play of contradictions, *Blacknesse* inspires the same in its commentators. Having argued that none other than Jonson succeeds in 'a more favourable approach to the black man...with little to demean him other than his unattractive colour', Elliott Tokson then avers that *The Masque of Blacknesse* was 'typical in its depiction of English taste...weighted with racial ideas and cultural judgements'.<sup>26</sup> Of the essence of these entertainments, what, I would like to ask, can be said about the combination of antithetic, outer, visible difference, and the need to subject the African figure, each of which concerns drives the motor of this thesis?

My opening chapter will provide the foundational work to which Othello's performative tropings remain pegged. In Chapter II, I will call upon several interjections, both critical and performative, that propel through history Othello, the Moor, and the stark effects of his theatrical suppression. These encounters with black racial identity – with stagings of *Othello* – will move us to a greater understanding of the socio-cultural ideologies that surround productions of the play. In its epochal, temporal moments *Othello* is something of a barometer of extant racial awareness and sentiment which, to remind ourselves, 'is not a homogenous or clearly articulated category, but one that develops by drawing, often arbitrarily and contradictorily, upon various popular beliefs as well as more elite ideas, upon traditional notions as well as newer knowledges'.<sup>27</sup> More bluntly, Henry Louis Gates submits that 'Race is the ultimate trope of difference because it is so very

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 141. ('It is but standing in his eye / You'll feel yourselves changed by and by', *The Irish Masque at Court*, II. 161-2.)

<sup>25</sup> *The Jonsonian Masque* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 127.

<sup>26</sup> *The Popular Image of the Black Man in English Drama, 1550-1688*, pp. 44, 50.

<sup>27</sup> Ania Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 109.

arbitrary in its application'.<sup>28</sup> What I intend to do in Chapter II is to assemble around specific performances of *Othello* (but chiefly performances *by* Othello) the variety of applications then produced by the colonising Centre, so as to track crossovers and discrepancies between the epistemologic and the performative.<sup>29</sup>

My methodology hereafter will cite the work of a number of postcolonial commentators who argue for the instability of racial representation. Homi Bhabha has already alerted us to ways of reviewing the creation of black identity, which provenancing of the Other takes place every time Othello appears: 'the very question of identification only emerges in-between disavowal and designation. It is performed in the agonistic struggle between the epistemological, visual demand for a knowledge of the Other, and its representation in the act of articulation and enunciation'.<sup>30</sup> Which places us somewhere between 'I know you not' and 'I know you well'. The boundaries of Otherness are circumscribed by categories of absence (disavowal) and of essence (designation); the one a turning back of the clock to pre-empiric determination, the latter a forceful reminder of the purportedly proven and ineradicable against which the producing agency – colonial power – pits the oppressed, forcing dynamic states of emergence.

Gayatri Spivak recalls Bhabha's idea in similar terms, as the weightlessness of the subject abuts the heft of institutional hegemony at moments in time that need to be 'pluralized and plotted as confrontations rather than transition (they would thus be seen in relation to histories of domination and exploitation rather than within the great modes of production narrative)'. To Spivak, 'the most interesting manoeuvre

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<sup>28</sup> 'Writing, "Race," and the Difference it Makes', in *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 49.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Bové determines 'discourse' to be 'control by the power of positive production: that is, a kind of power that generates certain kinds of questions; a kind of power that, in the process, includes within its systems all those it produces as agents capable of acting within them'. See 'Discourse', in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, eds. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 54. Closer to home, Anthony Dawson argues for a 'discourse theory', a 'complex of ideas... that insists on the primacy of discourses, that views culture as an interweaving of texts, and that regards as a critical responsibility the task of unravelling discursive networks and exposing their ideological weft and warp'. See 'Performance and Participation: Desdemona, Foucault and the Actor's Body', in *Shakespeare, Theory and Performance*, ed. James Bulman (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 29. Dawson's article goes on to assert the representational primacy of these identity politics, in so much as '[t]he body signifies in the theatre as a crucial part of the performance; it establishes person' (37).

<sup>30</sup> *The Location of Culture*, p. 50.

is to examine the production of “evidence”, the cornerstone of the edifice of historical truth, and to anatomise the mechanics of the construction of the self-consolidating Other’.<sup>31</sup> In Chapter II, what we will see (of what was seen) of Othello after Shakespeare are demands made upon the physicality, class, costume, and Anglo-malleability of the Moor, each such construct not only reflective of the unassailable centre, but also determined to place the unknown into accessible categories of understanding. In this way I intend to carry out the work demanded by Jyotsna Singh:

It is crucial to expose the ideologies that secure the pleasure and understanding of most European audiences that separates the play from our colonial legacy of continual racial conflicts. Thus, to understand Othello’s place in the postcolonial moment is to open the play to competing ideologies of multiple interpretations, some of which will enable Othello’s descendants to claim their own histories.<sup>32</sup>

David Garrick (1719-79) played Othello in 1745, just as the categorisers of Enlightenment were codifying the physiology and sociology of his colour. We will see how in his attempts to create dramatic space between his Moorish interpretation and that of his more traditional rival, James Quin (1693-1766), Garrick effected a clumsy, physically inappropriate exoticisation. Edmund Kean (1789-1833) was Moor-in-Residence at the Drury Lane Theatre from 1814-33, as the Noble Savage, a whiter-than-thou construct, was recalled to scale the heights of Romanticism. Through Kean’s final illness, which coincided with the parliamentary proscription of slavery, the African-American Ira Aldridge (1807-67) became the ignoble savage with the temerity to be black and to play a replacement Othello, which unthinkable combination excited uproar in the press.

What manacles slavery left behind were picked up by social Darwinists, who propagated further psychic intrusions into blacks from within unestablished – and therefore vicissitudinal – ideologic boundaries. Between 1876 and 1881, Henry

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<sup>31</sup> ‘Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography’, in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, eds. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 3, 6-7.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Othello’s Identity, Postcolonial Theory, and Contemporary African Rewritings of Othello’, in *Women, “Race” and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, eds. Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 299.

Irving (1838-1905) altered and re-presented his Moor to the London stage in line with increasingly obdurate and separatist racial politics and amid qualms of authenticity and propriety. At the same time, Tommaso Salvini (1829-1915), an Italian 'outsider' to Shakespeare, produced a consistently terrifying, passionate Othello, one whose bestial appropriations made his white audience shudder. Each of these visual interpositions calls upon diffuse dialectics of absence/essence, affirming the independence of their construction, and enabling a critique of identity which, to Bhabha, is in constant flux: 'the question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a self-fulfilling prophecy – it is always the production of an "image" of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that identity'.<sup>33</sup>

Taking as a principle the need constantly to promulgate theatrically this equivocating discourse, and calling upon critical interventions into morality, nation, and the black self, I would like to make the following enquiries of the Moor: how effectively (or otherwise) did unrestrained imperialism impact upon the presence of Othello on stage and can I invoke any tensions within dramatic representation that recall abandoned stereotypes at the beck of political dynamism and racial gesture? Since, as we will see, Othello's skin colour could no longer be explained away climatologically, how, then, did newfound genetic 'understandings' come to fill this warrior's frame? Othello himself is a one-time slave, manumitted and made good. Given that the history of *Othello* is synchronic with the history of enslavement – the first successful English colonies were created in Virginia in 1607 as the Moor was making his earliest appearances on the English stage – can we determine any ideological connections – either implicit or exposed – to slavery?<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Homi Bhabha, 'Foreword: Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition', in *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. xvi.

<sup>34</sup> It is impossible to imagine that an audience would, in viewing a former, black African slave, make no psychic connection with the rampancy of the skin trade. What to many commentators started in 1555 with John Lok's kidnappings had metamorphosed, a century later, into formalised transplantations of human cargo. The conquests of Barbados (1625) and Jamaica (1655), each an end-pearl on the stolen Caribbean string, assured the English their regional domination. The gates were open, human hoes sought, and, 'in the century to 1810 a quarter of a million Africans were landed in... Barbados alone. Jamaica, which followed the Barbadian example of converting the land to sugar, imported some 600,000 Africans in the same period'. See James Walvin, *Black Ivory: A History of British Slavery* (London: Harper Collins, 1992), p. 7. The creation in 1672 of the Royal

Virginia Mason Vaughan is a doubter: 'in none of these discussions is Othello's race a major factor', she writes, her contention being that 'at the height of the slave trade Londoners conceived Shakespeare's Moor as a high ranking, noble courageous general, an English gentleman, represented by a white actor in blackface'.<sup>35</sup> My response is that although there will obviously be peaks and troughs of tolerance over the coming centuries, Othello's race is never not a factor. One of the issues raised in my films is that if a particular fashion whitens Othello, such blanching works to mask the possibility of a blacker, less credible, Moor. And if Othello was an Englishman, then all that he once was (and is no longer) is extinguished. He is supplanted by himself, entering into 'the process by which the metaphoric "masking" is inscribed on a lack which must then be concealed [and which] gives the stereotype both its fixity and phantasmal quality'.<sup>36</sup> To pull these strands together is to create the theoretical framework for the rest of this thesis: that is, the tracking through contemporaneous and contemporary discourses of the politics of identity as it attaches itself to the body of one standard-bearing, black, African male and, accordingly, to determine whether productions of *Othello* and Othello – ever-vacillating entities – come to fulfil or challenge categories of preconceived racial perception.

There is considerable evidence through time to show that the most potent theatrical signifier of black racial alterity, the masking of performative white skin with blackening agents, becomes effectually diluted when its primary function prevents the audience from seeing the more intense feelings of the actor. Instead of welcoming this racial appropriation, theatre-goers once bemoaned that blackness

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African Company, which monopolised the slave trade until the end of the century, served to confirm that the colonial 'will to power' was founded on the need, and the will, to disempower. The dichotomous rise and fall of empire and the African was further perpetuated in 1750 by a new company, Merchants Trading to Africa, which dealt in slaves through the increasingly enriched ports of London, Liverpool, and Bristol. The slow rise of humanitarian and emancipation lobbies accompanied increasing Christian conversion among slaves. England was already confronted with the contradiction of maintaining a liberal democracy at home and enforced servitude in its colonies; that slaves were becoming Christian brothers-in-arms further confounded separatist policies. The Somerset Case of 1771-2 saw Lord Mansfield decree, in a key legal precedent, that slaves could not be removed from England against their wills, yet trading in slaves in England was not itself abolished until 1807. The practice continued in the colonies until 1834 when it was replaced by apprenticeship. Full freedom followed in 1838.

<sup>35</sup> *Othello: a contextual history*, pp. 120-1.

<sup>36</sup> *The Location of Culture*, p. 77.

both shielded and stymied the release of facial emotion. To Samuel Foote, blacking up rendered all actors alike: 'I would here consider the Disposition of the features in these Gentlemen, but as the black Covering in this part before us hinders our discerning the Action of the Muscles, we cannot determine to which the Preference ought to be given, only from general observation'. Foote's lament contains an unusual paradox: 'Q[uin] would, were the blacking removed, be most successful in the Scenes of Rage, B[etterton] in those of Tenderness'.<sup>37</sup>

Arthur Murphy considered that 'the expression of the mind was wholly lost' under Garrick's make-up.<sup>38</sup> A glance at Horace Walpole's correspondence also reveals the limitations of playing in blackface: the poet Thomas Grey wrote of Spranger Barry's Othello as 'upwards of six foot in height, well and proportionably made, [who] treads well, and knows what to do with his limbs... I can say nothing of his face but that it was all black, with a wide mouth and good eyes'.<sup>39</sup> In the next century, Edmund Kean was content to shelve verisimilitude so as to ensure his own recognition on stage: 'Kean argued that a Moor need not be jet black, but what was more important to him was that the lighter make-up ensured that none of his facial expressions would be lost'.<sup>40</sup> It seems that that which was most sought (i.e. the maximum differentiation from whiteness) could also be the chief spoiler of the show. When all black skin does is render anodyne that which should be memorable, any urge to understand it anthropologically will fail to broach the theatrical arena.<sup>41</sup>

The pointless veneer extended to the non-theatrical Othello, *vide* Paul Hiffernan's plans for immortalising Shakespeare's great characters. In his first

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<sup>37</sup> Samuel Foote, 'A Treatise on the Passions, So far as they regard the Stage; With a critical Enquiry into the Theatrical Merit of Mr. Garrick, Mr. Quin, and Mr. Barry' [1747], in *Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage*, vol. 3, p. 216.

<sup>38</sup> *The Life of David Garrick, Esq.*, 2 vols. (London, 1801), i. 106.

<sup>39</sup> *Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W.S. Lewis, 48 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), xiv. 6.

<sup>40</sup> Raymond Fitzsimons, *Edmund Kean: Fire from Heaven* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1976), pp. 71-2.

<sup>41</sup> That Kean should be tawny and not black also promotes Othello's Anglicisation, to which I will return in Chapter II. Away from England's relative liberalism, Thomas Jefferson would soon alight upon the same shadowy principle: 'Are not the finer mixtures of red and white, the expressions of every passion by greater or less suffusions of colour in the one, preferable to that eternal monotony, which reigns in the countenances, that immoveable veil of black which covers all the emotions of other race?' 'Laws' from *Notes on the State of Virginia* [1787], in *Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 1984), pp. 264-5.

book, Hiffernan reveals a blueprint for a permanent 'Temple to Shakespeare'. Within would sit a tremendous combustion of panegyrics, with both Apollo and Virgil attesting to the might of the 'great Poet'. Hiffernan proposed 'a series of tragic exhibitions', which would give painted representations to Shakespeare's tragic heroes. With, that is, the notable exception of the figure of Othello, whose omission comes because 'the blacking screens and renders incommunicable to spectators all impassioned workings of the countenance'.<sup>42</sup> Anthony Dawson argues that '[p]articipation...requires a way of thinking about the actor's body that invests it with the rhetorical power to move, to affect the physical bodies of the spectators and to signify as the *person* who both represents [the actor] and is represented [Othello]'.<sup>43</sup> Yet clearly the application of blackface problematises these twin significations.

Black make-up supplied racial difference while smothering physiognomic difference, at once confirming and confounding signification, making doubly-difficult the option of non-biased theatrical representation. Sujata Iyengar sees the charged palimpsest of blackface as a construct that foregrounds the lurking tropes of blackness in the white imagination; in other words that a blackened Othello will perform according to white expectation.<sup>44</sup> Yet I hope it has been useful to historicise the side effects of this signifier, so as to adduce a (literal) counter-valencing of colonial desire from a palimpsest that negates its own purpose. As I continue I will position Othello amid the industrialisation of blackface, as in American minstrelsy and the British burlesques of the nineteenth century. We will also continue to see the dialectic of absence/presence initiated by blacking up as I turn, for the remainder of this thesis, to *Othello* on screen.

The seminal work on Otherness by Frantz Fanon offers a fine opportunity to assess the issues of 'identity', of 'otherness', and of 'subjectivity' as manifested through the overwhelmingly 'white' machinery that is Hollywood. Critics have wrongly assumed that stereotyping sits at Shakespeare's end of the production line,

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<sup>42</sup> *Dramatic Genius. In Five Books* (1770), in *Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage*, vol. 5, p. 412.

<sup>43</sup> 'Performance and Participation: Desdemona, Foucault and the Actor's Body', in *Shakespeare, Theory and Performance*, ed. James Bulman (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 43.

<sup>44</sup> Sujata Iyengar, 'White Faces, Blackface: the Production of "Race" in *Othello*', in *'Othello': New Critical Essays*, ed. Philip C. Kolin (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), p. 105.

that now black actors are being invited to perform roles, emancipation is automatic: 'Since the 1980s and 1990s, black actors have regularly played black roles, and while the stereotyping of the black man as, for example, the agent of miscegenation is still present in Shakespeare's storyline, the removal of the blackface mask seems like an act of liberation'.<sup>45</sup>

I know not seems. As I will show, more than mere colour-correct casting is required to remove Othello's masks. It is not just grasping the text, but visualising that grasp; and then not merely displaying all that is present, but seeing beyond and deciphering all that is made absent in the showing. Whereas the Antillean's purpose is 'to enable the man of colour to understand, through specific examples, the psychological elements that can alienate his fellow Negroes',<sup>46</sup> the screen provides me with another set of specific examples with which to understand this psychologised alienation. Fanon's choice is to critique the inherent weakness of syncretism and the prolonged insecurity that develops when the oppressed determines to split his psyche so as to accord with white culture, with white power. My choice is to take that same white power and critique its domination of black skin – its subjugation of black identity – as processed via Othello's filmmakers.

Neil Taylor's delight at modern unmasking is provoked by the historic screen production of painted moors. As I move in my ensuing chapters to examine the political contexts of Othello's appropriation, we will see that a blackface Moor does not necessarily constrain blackness as 'unrepresentable'; rather, the political commitments of the *auteur* Orson Welles, the fanciful essentialism of Laurence Olivier, and the supervening hegemony of the BBC, generate specific, time-bound polemics which both destabilise and re-confirm inherent racialising ideologies. I should note that for their films, Welles, Olivier and Anthony Hopkins followed in the tradition of blacking up, Olivier with considerable relish. Of these race reversals, Arthur J. Little Jr. informs us that 'the white actor's inability or ability to

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<sup>45</sup> Neil Taylor, 'National and racial stereotypes in Shakespeare films', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*, ed. Russell Jackson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 270. Celia R. Daileader argues against Taylor's totalising assertion. See 'Casting black actors: beyond Othellophilia', in *Shakespeare and Race*, eds. Catherine M.S. Alexander and Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 177-202.

<sup>46</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 79.

play black presumes to become, in a final analysis, a very real testament to the stability or adaptability of whiteness'.<sup>47</sup> The West Indian writer, Caryl Phillips, understands that stability to be severely challenged, recalling that 'we have been subjected to a procession of sun-blotched Oliver Hardy look-alikes waddling across the English stage, causing worry both to themselves and their audiences as to whether or not the make-up will come off on the face of Desdemona'.<sup>48</sup>

Slapstick aside, film gifts me the purpose of removing visual layers so as to uncover the black body, to ponder the relevance of cross-cultural body fashioning and its own part in gulling the black presence, which, to Homi Bhabha, 'ruins the representative narrative of Western personhood'. And I do so visually, even as 'the White man's eyes break up the Black man's body and in that act of epistemic violence its own frame of reference is transgressed, its field of vision disturbed'.<sup>49</sup> As I then turn to contextualise and critique five films of *Othello* from the 1980s to the present day, I will incorporate the voices of important commentators such as Henry Louis Gates and the radical feminist, bell hooks, so as to position the black body within contemporary black discourse.

Michael Bristol shrewdly articulates the parlousness of any attempt to recreate Shakespeare's Venetian Moor, in that 'the history of the reception of *Othello* is the history of attempts to articulate ideologically correct, that is, palatable interpretations'.<sup>50</sup> From Chapter III onwards I will expand upon the forms in which Fanon's vexations reach the screen, defining each within its own visual world, working to show how the Shakespeare industry both succeeds and fails in its search for *Othello*'s palatability. I will firstly discuss Orson Welles's conflation of racism with fascism and his *Othello*'s response to the circumscriptive politics of Nazism; thereafter, I will look at Laurence Olivier blacking up to play the Moor in 1964-5, a time of enhanced black theatrical and philosophical representation as well as a time of a large-scale, black migration to Britain, which carried unconscionable political consequences. Chapter V and my conclusion will converge upon *Othello* on film

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<sup>47</sup> *Shakespeare Jungle Fever: National-Imperial Re-Visions of Race, Rape, and Sacrifice* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 97.

<sup>48</sup> 'A black European success', in *The European Tribe* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), pp. 45-6.

<sup>49</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, 'Foreword', in *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. xii.

<sup>50</sup> *Big-time Shakespeare* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 201.

since 1981, as I continue to map the curious paradox of one moor's dependable irrationality.

For corroboration, I will turn towards the directorial. My argument will be invigorated by fuller discussions of the use made of black bodies by white directors and, in the case of Othello, the white actors who have assumed that specific role. It is also an excellent opportunity to assess the preponderance of racial stereotyping, which, I will argue, makes up the greater part of Othello's performances on screen, whether by white or black. 'Alterity for the black man', writes Fanon, 'is not the black man but the white man'.<sup>51</sup> I wish to pursue the white that pressurises the black in order to create this dangerously lopsided binarism.

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<sup>51</sup> *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 97.

Chapter I  
 'Those Kinde of People', and how they got that way

Wayfaring ancestors to George Turberville were numerous: literate Elizabethans would have enjoyed reportage dating back to Herodotus, 'The Father of History';<sup>1</sup> thereafter the Greek's Roman admirers, Pliny and Solinus, would take up the cudgels of travel writings, invariably to record the phantasmagoric as well as to report upon the dynamics of societies ancient and modern, the emphasis upon cultural diversity from Empires as far flung as Africa, Persia, and Egypt.<sup>2</sup> By the time 'Sir John Mandeville' came along nearly two thousand years later, nothing had changed: the fabulous far eclipsed the factual: 'The reverence for the written word was such that virtually any account could be uncritically transcribed and believed, and thus the monsters of classical antiquity (the dog-headed men, the basilisk-eyed women, and the rest) found their way into *Mandeville's Travels*'.<sup>3</sup>

Incipient *masseurs* of cultural anthropology relied heavily on the precedent setters. But in fact they proved themselves to be the most consistent of Chinese whisperers, who once again breathed into our ears news of 'the cannibals that each other eat, / The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders' (1.3.144-5).<sup>4</sup> Even (or perhaps, particularly) at the outset of the era of great discovery, knowledge of foreigners was based on centuries' old dogma. Even the most celebrated (and problematic) of all discoverers found his ardour for the new infused with implicit trust in the old, for '[w]hen Columbus embarked on his

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<sup>1</sup> Of the region of 'eastern Libya', for example, Herodotus observes that 'it is here that the huge snakes are found – and lions, elephants, bears, asps, and horned asses, not to mention dog-headed men, headless men with eyes in their breasts (I don't vouch for this, but merely repeat what the Libyans say), wild men and wild women, and a great many other creatures by no means of a fabulous kind'. See *The Histories*, tr. Aubrey de Selincourt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954), p. 334.

<sup>2</sup> Pliny and Solinus had responded to the call of their Empire by recording anthropologies in *Natural History* and *Polyhistor* respectively, the latter of which 'enjoyed an almost unrivalled popularity and was used avidly by the Medieval encyclopedists and chroniclers' (Boies Penrose, *Travel and Discovery in the Renaissance, 1420-1620* [Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967], p. xv), albeit 'in terms that are either identical with or very similar to those used by the Greek historian' (Margaret T. Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1964], p. 44).

<sup>3</sup> M.C. Seymour, 'Introduction', *Mandeville's Travels* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. xv.

<sup>4</sup> I have used E.A.J. Honigmann's Arden edition of *Othello* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1997) for this and all subsequent citations from the play.

first voyage, belief in the Plinian races was still firm, and it is likely that he had read Mandeville's famous book of travels'.<sup>5</sup> If all roads lead to Pliny's Rome, then all roads lead from it too. And on that outbound journey, as mentioned above, was Sir John Mandeville, whose peregrinations were to have a 'significant impact on the Renaissance conception of the world'.<sup>6</sup>

Whether or not he was an English knight, a French treatise writer, a Belgian notary, or simply a 'charming medieval plagiarist',<sup>7</sup> his legacy blazed a literary trail through the Renaissance and long into the Enlightenment, until at least 1750, by which year 'only Chaucer among other fourteenth-century English works has a comparably large and constant body of readers'.<sup>8</sup> *The Travels* began to circulate in Europe sometime between 1356 and 1366 and were available in every European language by 1400. Chiefly a travel guide for pilgrims to Jerusalem, they boasted nonetheless of 'first-hand' experience of India, Egypt, Amazonia, and Ethiopia among others. It is to the last of these and its near neighbours that I turn, so as to further our understanding of the 'oddities' of the African that were – and continue to be – so widely circulated.

The foundations of cultural quiddity lie in the systems of beliefs and mythologies that revolve around Creation. For Mandeville, half a millennium ahead of Darwin, *The Book of Genesis* contained the then incontrovertible, theistic evidence of the origins of species, which the author details so as to apportion both regional and colour difference to the descendents of Noah's sons: 'Yee schulle vndirstonde that alle the world was destroyed be Noes Flood saf only Noe and his

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<sup>5</sup> Gustav Jahoda, *Images of Savages: Ancient Roots of Modern Prejudice in Western Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 15. Jahoda's work 'examines how pre-existing myths, doctrines or theories influenced the perceptions of first-hand observers and subsequent second-hand interpretations' (Preface, xiii).

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Hadfield, *Amazons, Savages & Machiavels: Travel & Colonial Writing in English, 1550-1630* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Baine Campbell, *Wonder and Science: Imagining Worlds in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 31.

<sup>8</sup> C.W.R.D. Moseley, 'Introduction', in *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 29. For a discussion of the provenance of the 'Mandeville' nomenclature see Moseley, pp. 10-12. Personally, I prefer the 'Man About Town' neutrality of his name. Moseley whispers of a play written about Mandeville in the 1590s and referred to by Thomas Nashe in *Nashes Lenten Stuffe* (1599). The play is not extant, it seems, although it is worth pointing out the theatrical possibilities attached to Mandeville's name.

wif and children. Noe had iii. Sones, Sem [Shem], Cham [Ham], and Iapeth [Japhet]. This Cham was he that saugh his fadres preuy membres naked whan he slepte and scorned hem and schewed hem with his finger... and therefore he was cursed of God'.<sup>9</sup>

Ham was to found Africa – to sire the black race – as a result of God's curse. The transgressor was tasked with fathering a tribe of transgressors, whose visibly different and morally tainted black skin opposed the purity of Christian whiteness. We find the successors of the Tribes of Ham in Mandeville's Ethiopia: 'In Ethiop ben many dyuerse folk ... In that contree ben folk that han but o foot, and thei gon so blyue that it is meruallye, and the foot so large that it schadeweth alle the body ayen the sonne whanne thei wole lye and reste hem. In Ethiopie, when the children ben yonge and lytille, thei ben alle yalowe, and whan that thei wexen of age that yalowness turneth to ben alle blak'.<sup>10</sup> It might have been the sun that turned the children black, were they not able to climb under their own feet for shade, that is. It was not that Mandeville was out on his own either. He was a member of a busy, male fantasists' club:

During the period from the 13th to the 15th centuries, 'Aethiopians' (then a general term denoting African blacks) were characterised by a number of scholastics and others in a manner strikingly reminiscent of some of the stereotypes that echoed down the centuries. Marco Polo wrote that the blacks are naked and horribly ugly, like devils; Mathieu Paris, Brunetto Latini and Roger Bacon referred to their 'debauchery'; John Mandeville described them as black, ugly giants with huge sexual organs; and Ludolph de Suchem mentions a region peopled by black men and women with the bodies of monkeys.<sup>11</sup>

Edward Said writes that, 'fictions have their own logic and their own dialectic of growth or decline'.<sup>12</sup> Mandeville and his creative successors were to spark a period of fictive development in which the stories of peoples unknown flourished unchecked. And that is not to forget sex, ever a big-seller, to the point that the black man's 'sexual goals and capacities were the objects of much attention... and

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<sup>9</sup> *Mandeville's Travels*, pp. 160-1.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>11</sup> Gustav Jahoda, *Images of Savages: Ancient Roots of Modern Prejudice in Western Culture*, p. 27.

<sup>12</sup> *Orientalism* (Vintage Books: New York, 1979), p. 62.

frequently became focal points of interest',<sup>13</sup> elements which I will expand upon in my own analyses of the development of the staged Moor. For the Mandevillean record though, the size of the African penis proves no less worthy of elephantine aggrandisement than those belonging to the over-heated inhabitants of the island of 'Crues':<sup>14</sup> '[T]here is so grete hete in tho marches, and namely in that ile, that for the grete distress of the hete mennes ballokkes hangen down to here knees for the gret dissolucoun of the body'.<sup>15</sup>

The African distortions became useful, if not crucial, firstly to the Portuguese efforts to colonise West Africa from the mid-fifteenth century, thence to England's own geo-commercial interests a century later. There was a sense of the pre-determined about Mandeville's African exploits, a push to control knowledge as much as to release information, for 'a reader of Mandeville would see Africa as a place not only of grotesque bodies but of continual abrogation of European models of gender, marriage, and rule';<sup>16</sup> which are precisely the targets hit by playwrights some two centuries later as they focussed on Othello's irrational mind within his irrepressible body.

If Mandeville beetled his way through the 'magical mystery tour of foreign lands',<sup>17</sup> we can at least be sure that the next major influence over artistic perspective was known to have sailed. Perhaps this knowledge ensured that 'the great popularity of Africanus's work, which replaced Pliny's *Natural History* and the later *Book of John Mandeville* [was] definitive of Africa...in the European mind for the next two hundred years'.<sup>18</sup> Born in Granada in 1488, Hasan Ibn Muhammad al-Wazzan is more familiarly known as Joannes Leo Africanus, or simply 'Leo

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<sup>13</sup> Elliot H. Tokson, *The Popular Image of the Black Man in English Drama, 1550-1688* (Boston, Mass.: G.K. Hall and Co., 1982), p. 137. Tokson assails the representation of black skin on the Renaissance and Reformation stages by categorising the denigratory groupings into which blackness would be placed. Thus the author deals separately with Erotism, Devilishness, Colour Symbolism, etc.

<sup>14</sup> Probably Hormuz in the Persian Gulf.

<sup>15</sup> *Mandeville's Travels*, p. 120.

<sup>16</sup> Kim Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 26.

<sup>17</sup> James Walvin, *The Negro and English Society, 1555-1945*, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> John C. Hawley provides an interesting historiography of Africanus's work in his article, "'Leo Africanus" in the Renaissance and Today', in *Colonial and Postcolonial Incarceration* (London: Continuum, 2001), pp. 53-66, this on p. 56.

Africanus'.<sup>19</sup> Around 1518, this widely-travelled Ambassador to Wattasid Sultan Mohammed of Morocco was captured in the Mediterranean Sea by Christian pirates and handed over to Papal authorities. He was 'converted' and personally baptised by Pope Leo X, whence comes his Latinate name.<sup>20</sup> Africanus's meanderings presented a confusing mixture of his origin and ethnic hybridity:

An author of Arab origins, he is writing in Europe, in faulty Italian, a text about Africa and addressing European readers at the time when they had very little reliable information about this continent. This set of circumstances was unique for an early sixteenth-century writer, and a great deal about the text and its impact on European representations of Africa can only be understood in light of this fact.<sup>21</sup>

Leo's own cultural heredity should make the reader aware of potential bias toward his subjects, which he limits to Africans, Moors and Arabians living in Numidia, or 'the Desert of Libya'.<sup>22</sup> But partisanship is stymied by Africanus's classifications: at times all his subjects come under the umbrella of the generic 'Numidian' or 'African', categories which deny us the specifics of racial origin and confound attempts to discern between, say, 'Moor' and 'Negro'. Africanus, like many after him, fails satisfactorily to define the difference not between him and his subjects but, simply, between his subjects. When Leo refers to 'The Manners and Customes of the African People, Which Inhabit the Desert of Libya', he decries that they are 'altogether careless and destitute of vertue' and that the women be 'gross, corpulent, and of a swart complexion'.<sup>23</sup> In short, it is impossible to know whom he is talking about, but that they seem hardly the type to bring home to meet mother. This lack of distinction confronts Africanus's audience and critics alike, and goes

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<sup>19</sup> *The History and Description of Africa* was completed in 1526, published in Italian in 1550, in Latin in 1556, and translated into English by John Pory in 1600. I will return to this date when discussing Thomas Dekker's *Lust's Dominion* further down the page.

<sup>20</sup> As Hawley points out, 'both Leo and Othello were enslaved and set free; both had to demonstrate their trustworthiness before they could be listened to by European society. And... both felt themselves alienated and both had to deal with this fact in their subsequent self-representation'. See "Leo Africanus" in the Renaissance and Today', p. 57.

<sup>21</sup> Oumelbanine Zhiri, 'Leo Africanus's *Description of Africa*', in *Travel Knowledge: European Discoveries in the Early Modern Period*, eds. Ivo Kamps and Jyotsna Singh (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 258.

<sup>22</sup> Hadfield (*Amazons, Savages & Machiavels*, p. 147) suggests this to refer to Morocco and Fez, although the Western Sahara should also be considered.

<sup>23</sup> *History and Description of Africa*, i. 151.

some way to revealing the paucity of coherent classifications available not just in the mid-fourteenth century, but also in the present. We, like our itinerant ancestors, rely upon extant literatures to make our determinations for us, as we

[t]ravel and explore the world, carrying with us some 'background books.' These need not accompany us physically; the point is that we travel with preconceived notions of the world, derived from our cultural tradition. In a very curious sense we travel knowing in advance what we are on the verge of discovering, because past reading has told us what we are supposed to discover. In other words, the influence of these background books is such that, irrespective of what travellers discover and see, they will interpret and explain everything in terms of these books.<sup>24</sup>

Two centuries prior to Leo, Mandeville had defined Ethiopia as 'departed in ii. princypalle parties, and that is in the est partie and in the meridionalle partie, the whiche partie meridionelle is clept Moretane. And the folk of that contree ben blake that in the tother partie, and thei ben clept Mowres'.<sup>25</sup> To Africanus, this same region is 'Barbarie', equivalent to the *Mahgreb* nations of North Africa, namely Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria, home to both Moors and Arabians. The Arabians of Numidia are both 'wittie and conceited in penning of verses' while also 'somewhat more vile and barbarous then those which inhabite the deserts'.<sup>26</sup> The Moors and Arabians who inhabit Libya, on the other hand, are 'somewhat civill of behaviour, being plaine dealers, voide of dissimulation, favourable to strangers, and lovers of simplicitie. Those which we named white, or Tawney Moores, are stedfast in friendship: as likewise they indifferently and favourably esteeme of other nations'.<sup>27</sup>

Here, perhaps for the first time, we find reference to a whiter kind of black, a lesser kind of 'swart', worthy of separation because they seem to possess qualities closer to home. But still these colour codes will not be cracked. To look back at the etymology of the word 'Moor' is only to invite further confusion: 'The Spanish derived the word "moro" from the Latin word "maurus" which in turn came from

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<sup>24</sup> Umberto Eco, 'From Marco Polo to Leibniz: Stories of Intellectual Misunderstandings', in *Serendipities: Language and Lunacy*, tr. William Weaver (Harcourt, Brace & Company: New York, 1998), p. 54.

<sup>25</sup> *Mandeville's Travels*, p. 114.

<sup>26</sup> *History and Description of Africa*, i. 160.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, i. 162.

the Greek “mavros” meaning black. But they used it to designate their conquerors who were not black at all but a mixture of Arab and Berber Muslims... an instance of how religion and ethnicity were expressed through a vocabulary of colour’.<sup>28</sup>

The writers at the turn of the seventeenth century who donned Africanus’s robes were similarly unconcerned about true colour: ‘[r]egardless of what the more informed writers may have said about the different colours of Africans, only their blackness seems to have registered firmly in the minds of audience and playwrights alike... Africans – generally called Moors, irrespective of their place of origin – were black’.<sup>29</sup> Of these simplifying racial tendencies of Tudor and Stuart drama, Eliot Tokson considers that the ‘national identity and geographic origins of the black man are sufficiently blurred by the characters so that a black man, be he Moor, Negro, or Ethiopian, was simply considered to be a black man’.<sup>30</sup>

When Leo refers to ‘They’, as in ‘They’ who are ‘addicted unto covetise’ and ‘They’ in whom ‘hardly shall you finde so much as a sparke of pietie’,<sup>31</sup> he could have been referring to anybody who was not white. And this becomes the key to interpretation, the catch-all that makes no enquiry into itself; black is black and that is that. This has worked its way down to contemporary critics, who are similarly confounded. As Eliot Tokson conflates all such non-white racial difference into the term ‘black man’, so Anthony Barthelemy’s definition of Moor is all that is ‘strange’,<sup>32</sup> while Kim Hall’s includes ‘Muslims, Native Americans, Indians, white

<sup>28</sup> Ania Loomba, “‘Delicious traffick’: racial and religious difference on early modern stages’, in *Shakespeare and Race*, p. 210.

<sup>29</sup> Eldred Jones, *Othello’s Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 51. Jones provides readings of the gamut of plays from the Tudors through to the Restoration which contained characters presented as Moors, and gives us an early example of race theory at work within a Shakespearean context by similarly positioning the creation of ‘black’ characters amid the available discourses on travel and, effectively, otherness. Jones contributes a compelling study to the field, notable for its dispassionate approach to the ubiquity of racism. In archaeologising the history of black representation, Jones unearths the space in which the black figure came to claim its own representational authority, even if such an arena of representation was mired in misjudgment and misconception.

<sup>30</sup> *The Popular Image of the Black Man in English Drama, 1550-1688*, p. 36. Tokson considers travel writings to be a ‘non-literary response’ to blackness (the title of his first chapter). I am not so sure that they qualify as non-literature; many reports were as fantastic as the keenest creative mind might have conjured.

<sup>31</sup> *Historie and Description of Africa*, i. 186.

<sup>32</sup> *Black Face, Maligned Race: The Representation of Blacks in English Drama from Shakespeare to Southerne* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University, 1987), p. 17.

North Africans, and Jews'.<sup>33</sup> For Muslims, Gustav Jahoda declares that 'the notion of "Muslims" and "Blacks" was conflated in the term "Moors"'.<sup>34</sup> While I will use the generic 'Black' in reference both to Othello and his brethren,<sup>35</sup> perhaps the last word in this debate should go to S.E. Ogude, who in returning us to the play, reminds us of the only true division here: 'it is almost certain that the rich store of abusive language [Iago] often hurls at Othello reflects the attitudes of Elizabethans to blacks, be they blackamoors, Negroes, Ethiopians, chivalrous Moors, or plain Moors'.<sup>36</sup>

Africanus continues his decidedly ambivalent approach to blackness which, to some critics, leads to Shakespeare having utilised *The History and Description of Africa* in his creation of Othello the man, for these Arabians 'have alwaies been much delighted with alle kinde of civilitie and modest behaviour [and yet] no nation in the world is so subject unto jealousy; for they will rather leese their lives, then put up any disgrace in the behalfe of their women',<sup>37</sup> while the Africans living in Barbarie 'will deeply engrave in marble any injurie be it never so small, & will in no wise blot it out of their remembrance',<sup>38</sup> both of which should alert us to Othello's refusal to countenance the innocence of his fated alabaster.

It is worth remembering that to the readers of Africanus, 'black was an emotionally partisan colour, the handmaid and symbol of baseness and evil, a sign of danger and repulsion'.<sup>39</sup> For early dramatisers of the unknown, the negative connotations of blackness were far more marketable than the virtues Africanus had relayed. Given Leo's racial ambiguities, it is harsh to observe that 'the core of the

<sup>33</sup> *Things of Darkness*, p. 7.

<sup>34</sup> *Images of Savages: Ancient Roots of Modern Prejudice in Western Culture*, p. 27.

<sup>35</sup> 'African-American' where appropriate.

<sup>36</sup> 'Literature and Racism: The Example of Othello', in *Othello: New Essays by Black Writers*, ed. Mythili Kaul (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1997), p. 155.

<sup>37</sup> *Historie and Description of Africa*, i. 182. For discussions of Shakespeare's sources for the play, see Virginia Mason Vaughan's *Othello: a contextual history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 56, 63, and E.A.J. Honigmann's 'Introduction' to the Arden Shakespeare *Othello*, pp. 4-5, 15-16. Also worthy of mention is Rosalind Johnson's article 'African Presence in Shakespearean Drama: Parallels between Othello and the Historical Leo Africanus', in *African Presence in Early Europe*, ed. Ivan Van Sertima (New Brunswick and London: Transaction, 1985), pp. 276-87.

<sup>38</sup> *Historie and Description of Africa*, i. 183.

<sup>39</sup> Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), p. 7.

description of Africa in Europe until the first half of the sixteenth century goes back as far as antiquity... [thus] Africa was generally considered a desert dominated by powerful wild animals. As for the people, they were portrayed as less than human, and sometimes as monstrous'.<sup>40</sup> This is simply not in keeping with Africanus's flow of information. Of the Arabs who live in tents in Barbaria, Leo reports that they are 'generous, pious, open, familiar, honest, obedient, reliable, agreeable and merry', but that the mountain inhabitants of the same country are 'very beastly and ... thieves'.<sup>41</sup> Pity then the inhabitants of Numidia who are 'traitors, murderers, and thieves without any conscience',<sup>42</sup> for it is to the latter calumnies that the populace turned for their understanding of the Other, for 'such fantasies tended to cement in the minds of the English people the notion that Africans were inherently carefree, lazy, and lustful [to the point that] the pale-skinned islanders disposed to make ethnocentric generalisations about dark-skinned people from over the sea found the persistent folk myths a convenient quarry'.<sup>43</sup>

Margaret Hodgen refers to this blinkeredness as purveying 'a fabulous sediment of what had once been a comparatively realistic antique ethnography'.<sup>44</sup> But it is worth pointing out that there were few opportunities, at least before the late sixteenth century, for the man in the street to verify what he might have read. Black skin had, as I have said, only made a concerted appearance in England from 1555, although 'as early as the beginning of the fifteenth century, James IV of Scotland had a series of Africans attached to his court'.<sup>45</sup> It is only as we approach the fecund times of late Tudor and early Stuart drama that the numbers of blacks in London and other cities increased. Although ostensibly slaves, at last there were living specimens to absorb which could only further have piqued the interest of audiences and creators alike.

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<sup>40</sup> Oumelbanine Zhiri, p. 261.

<sup>41</sup> *Historie and Description of Africa*, i. 186.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, i. 186.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The history of black people in Britain* (London and Sydney: Pluto Press, 1984), p. 7.

<sup>44</sup> *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, p. 34.

<sup>45</sup> Panikos Panayi, *Immigration, ethnicity and racism in Britain, 1815-1945* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 16-17.

Leo's description was not available in English translation until 1600, but this would not have precluded access by the educated to his 'faulty Italian' efforts. For vernacular stimulation, the Elizabethans would turn to their own Archdeacon of Westminster, Richard Hakluyt the Younger. Hakluyt intended that his collection of travelogues, which appeared in 1589 under the title *The Principall Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques & Discoveries of the English Nation*, should 'bring Antiquities smothered and buried in darke silence, to light, and to preserve certaine memorable exploits of late yeeres by our English nation atchieved, from the greedy and devouring jawes of oblivion'.<sup>46</sup>

Hakluyt promised a collation of first-hand discourses, principally ships' logs, and economic analyses, from a variety of travellers whose spirit of discovery had by now led them to circumnavigate the globe. In part, *The Principall Navigations* would introduce to the Englishman the dominions and customs of even lesser known cultures such as, say, Islam, at the same time as those of New World America were circulated.<sup>47</sup> Jack Beeching notes the temporal proximity of the Armada to the promulgation of Hakluyt's narratives, which 'helped to give nascent English patriotism a tone of voice, indeed a life-style it was not to discard until very recent times... The world was to be mastered for its own good'.<sup>48</sup>

The many readers of Hakluyt were finally able to gauge their patriotism against Turks and Moors, who were not merely 'racial' Others, but confirmed religious ones too. Like the increasing number of black Africans in London, so too had the Turkish empire brought its human self to our strange land. Nabil Mater confirms that from the 1580s until the 1630s 'thousands of Turks and Moors visited and traded in English and Welsh ports; hundreds were captured on the high seas and

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<sup>46</sup> From the 'Preface to the Second Edition, 1598', in *The Principal Navigations*, vol. 1 (Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons, 1903), p. xxxix.

<sup>47</sup> See Nabil Mater, *Turks, Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 99. Mater's is a fascinating account of the processes of cultural exchange that took place between Early Modern English travellers and their 'exotic' Muslim counterparts, be they traders, soldiers, pirates or captives. Mater's idea is to trace the 'evidence that has survived about the *actual* interaction between Britons and Muslims'. This he does by a broad research of 'contemporary prison depositions, captive's memoirs, Privy Council documents and other materials that were produced by Britons who had lived among the Muslims and mastered their language(s), or had spent weeks or months negotiating with them in London or trading with them in Algeria' (p. 7).

<sup>48</sup> 'Introduction', in *Voyages and Discoveries* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 20.

brought to stand trial in English courts; scores of ambassadors and emissaries dazzled the London populace with their charm, cuisine and “Araby” horses’.<sup>49</sup>

An English audience was finally empowered to compare the colourful eastern spectacles with the words and the ways of nautical masters such as William Hawkins, Martin Frobisher, Drake, Cavendish, Raleigh, and the wit of wannabes like George Turberville. Hakluyt, in short, covered the entire known world, chiefly from the 1520s to the 1590s, yet his texts were ever firmly angled towards home, towards the institutionalisation of English-ness as a virtue unmatched. According to Andrew Hadfield, Hakluyt’s work is an exhortation to ‘his fellow-countrymen to explore and colonize the world and so establish themselves as a powerful nation blessed by God’.<sup>50</sup> In the hands of the writers who, as we will see, were fully capable of exploiting morality through the immediacy of theatrical representation, there was brought to bear a powerful, nationalistic ideology which saw ‘a total separation from, and a moral sanction against, the uncivilized Other’,<sup>51</sup> which in turn accounted for the ‘persistent dehumanisation’ the black man suffered on stage.<sup>52</sup> John Lok’s account of *The Voyage to Guinea in the year 1554* tells of ‘certain black slaves’, who were brought (read ‘kidnapped’) to England.<sup>53</sup> Richard Eden’s account of Lok’s voyage to Mina, published in his *Decades of the New World* (1555), was also lifted into Hakluyt’s compendium. Eden observed that Africa was the home of ‘those people which we now call Moores, Moorens or Negroes, a people of beastly lyvyng, without a god, law, religion, or common wealth, and so scorched and vexed with the heate of the sunne, that in many places they curse it when it riseth’.<sup>54</sup>

Eden, apparently not one to seek verification, also returns to the Plinian monstrous, seizing hold of the fabulous baton for his own lap of the track. So we

<sup>49</sup> *Turks, Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>50</sup> Hadfield, *Amazons, Savages & Machiavels*, p. 15.

<sup>51</sup> Nabil Mater, *Turks, Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery*, p. 107.

<sup>52</sup> Tokson, *The Popular Image of the Black Man in English Drama*, p. 136.

<sup>53</sup> *Voyages and Discoveries*, p. 68. Hakluyt includes the following voyages to Guinea in his selections: Thomas Windham’s of 1553, John Lok’s of 1554, and William Towerson’s three voyages, of 1555, 1556, 1567.

<sup>54</sup> Taken from *Hakluyt’s Voyages: A Selection*, ed. Richard David (London: Chatto and Windus, 1981), p. 208.

read again of the dangers presented by the Blemines, who have their eyes and mouths in their breasts, Satyrs, Strucophagi, the Anthropophagi and all the other mind-forg'd marvels of the day. Given the scale of difference presented by Hakluyt, the ingestion of the supra-factual 'posed a severe challenge to the Englishman's most deeply ingrained cultural and social values...Of all the phenomena described in Hakluyt's volumes, none was more startling or difficult for the Englishman to comprehend than the black African'.<sup>55</sup> That lack of comprehension was actually a kind of willed ignorance – an uncompromising employment of only what one knows when confronted with what one does not know – which clung not only to hapless Africa, but to a Muslim empire that was beyond colonial reach, until writers had established in the popular conscience 'the stereotype of the Muslim' which saw the 'Turk' as 'cruel and tyrannical, deviant, and deceiving' and the Moor as 'sexually overdriven and emotionally uncontrollable'.<sup>56</sup>

On Hakluyt's death in 1616, his manuscripts were passed to Samuel Purchas who had rather bigger salt-water fish to fry. *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas his Pilgrimes* (1625) embellished upon *Voyages and Discoveries*, and was altogether a more sophisticated marketing exercise. Purchas, as he himself made quite clear, was riding on the back of the dead Hakluyt: most of his entries belonged to Hakluyt, although Purchas assumed an eccentric editorial control.<sup>57</sup> Within he sets up a series of propagandistic justifications for European superiority to assure the reader of his nation's stellar place in the global firmament, while the Other would implicitly remain *sub terra*. Although *Purchas his Pilgrimes* was not published until 1625, the collation of narratives took place even as represented black faces were multiplying.<sup>58</sup> An engagement with the racialising tendencies of the period is implicit within Purchas's verbose veneers:

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<sup>55</sup> Kim Hall, *Things of Darkness*, p. 23.

<sup>56</sup> Nabil Mater, *Turks, Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery*, p. 13. Mater had previously observed that 'there was no allusion in either the characterization or the dialogue in drama to specific aspects of Muslims that could be traced to actual meetings with them' (p. 7).

<sup>57</sup> Margaret Hodgen bars that Purchas's 'prolixity often outran his lucidity' (*Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, p. 217). I would instead observe that his prolixity often outran his purpose, lapping it several times.

<sup>58</sup> Andrew Hadfield points out that 'it was not until 1623 [i.e. the year of publication of Shakespeare's first folio] that a detailed account of West Africa, based on the first-hand experiences

Here therefore the various Nations, Persons, Shapes, Colours, Habits, Rites, Religions, Complexions, Conditions, Politike and Oeconomike Customes, Languages, Letters, Arts, Merchandises, Wares, and other remarkeable Varieties of Men and humane Affaires are by Eye-witnesses related more amply and certainly then any Collector ever hath done... which could not but be voluminous, having a World for the subject, and a World of Witnesses for the Evidence.<sup>59</sup>

Overall, the text speaks as much to Purchas's own commercial goals as to any ambitions his eyewitnesses might harbour. Claiming in the same epistle 'To the Reader' to have 'been an Athenian with these Athenians' (when in fact he stayed at home), Purchas asserts not only his spurious qualifications but also his own mutability, a Protean social communicator. And he was listened to, compiling 'the most frequently consulted source of information on travel and other cultures in the seventeenth century'.<sup>60</sup> According to Margaret Hodgen, *Purchas his Pilgrimes* was so unusual a concept and so extravagantly marketed that King James read it cover-to-cover seven times.<sup>61</sup> James was no doubt impressed by Purchas's claims of Christian ascendance, for 'Europe is taught the way to scale Heaven, not by Mathematicall principles, but by Divine veritie. Jesus Christ is their way, their truth, their life; who hath long since given a Bill of Divorce to ingratefull Asia, lesse in Africa, and nothing at all in America, but later European gleanings'.<sup>62</sup>

Of this, and other troped targets of Otherness, W.E. Washburn suggests that '[d]escriptions of the often inexplicable, cruel, and exotic customs of these peoples – whether political, religious, sexual, or social – even when described as “barbarous” or “savage” by the narrators or the compiler, did not necessarily signify a belief in the racial inferiority of the peoples described’.<sup>63</sup> But that is still not to answer for the way the reports were substantially manipulated by the full flow of the quill. In pointing out his readers' superior culture, Purchas elicits a second layer

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of an Englishman, Richard Jobson, was available to the reading public'. See *Amazons, Savages & Machiavels*, p. 120.

<sup>59</sup> *Hakluytus Posthumous or Purchas his Pilgrimes*, 20 vols. (Glasgow: MacLehose, 1905-7), i. xliii.

<sup>60</sup> Andrew Hadfield, *Amazons, Savages & Machiavels*, p. 9.

<sup>61</sup> Margaret Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, p. 236.

<sup>62</sup> *Purchas his Pilgrimes*, I.i.93.

<sup>63</sup> 'The Native Peoples', in *The Purchas Handbook: Studies of the life, times and writings of Samuel Purchas, 1577-1626* (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1997), p. 167.

of distortion into his accounts; the plinth on which his readers sit allows a morally elevated view of the unnamed cast members. All that seemed to be expected of the black African was that he lived up to his static reputation. My objective in this opening chapter is to determine how early modern dramatists took a stake in his theatrical production.

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Having now presented the origins of the Londoner's understanding of the black African corpus, it becomes crucial to determine the application of this white discourse upon black representations on stage in the period; a reflection not merely of the scope of travel writings available to the literate Elizabethan, but also of the search for dramatic symbioses, of how white *and* black can both come to entertain and to enhance reputations on the stage. But before I proceed, I would like to note the socially repressive background against which the stage African took his first faltering steps:

[Anti-alien sentiment] was common and consistent enough for political rebels to count on it as a rallying-cry in the 1550s and 1560s; actual attacks, anticipated attacks, or investigations of threatening materials (such as anti-alien pamphlets or broadsheets) are recorded for... 1573, 1575, 1581, 1583, 1586, 1587, 1593, and 1595 [which] pattern especially points up the fact that the increased presence of strangers during Elizabeth's reign was accompanied by a rising tide of anti-alien expression.<sup>64</sup>

The relative cluster between 1573 and 1595 is worthy of note. The attacks were clearly not 'racially' oriented; rather, the predominant motivation was to rid the country of foreign, mainly Dutch, merchants. But the figures nonetheless suggest orchestrated attempts to expunge foreign strains from the realm. To this end

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<sup>64</sup> Laura Hunt Yungblut, *Strangers Settled Here Amongst Us: Policies, Perceptions and the Presence of Aliens in Elizabethan England* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 40-1. Although the work spans the Norman Conquests to the death of Elizabeth I in 1603, Yungblut focuses on the political impact of both economic migration into England and England's 'duty' to accept Protestant refugees from mid- to late-sixteenth-century *autos-da-fé*. She also touches upon a root of racial disharmony which retains powerful contemporary applications: the fear of the 'invader' who comes to steal the social wherewithal of the native.

theatrical representation could become another means of pinpointing the looks and the flaws of various classes of undesirable.

The years 1600-1601 proved crucial to the extended promulgation of racial Realpolitik from the stage and became something of a temporal lynchpin for each of the works discussed in this chapter. Integral to negative offensives against the black African were Queen Elizabeth's own, personal, millennial qualms of the presence in London of the visible Other. Into the kingdom in August 1600 had come sixteen Moors, the retinue of an embassy from Morocco, who were official guests of the queen and her government in London. They were to stay for six months on a visit that was only a partly successful diplomatic gambit.<sup>65</sup> With due serendipity, Leo Africanus's *History and Description of Africa* was translated into English in the same year by John Pory. Africanus's tome of non-Whiteness was dedicated by Pory to Robert Cecil with the hope that 'at this time I thought they would prooue the more acceptable; in that the Marocan ambassadour (whose Kings dominions are here most amplie and particularly described) hath so lately treated with your Honour concerning matters of that estate'.<sup>66</sup>

Those 'dominions' were created psychologically as well as geographically. Africanus's descriptions of the land could hardly be tested by the armchair anthropologist, yet the presence in London of some of the exotic peoples about whom Leo poured forth created prime territory for a psychic evaluation of the Moor. Thus, a large party of dark-skinned foreigners would have found themselves under the acute, critical gaze of a newly-informed, literate public, to whom 'the appearance and the conduct of the Moors was a spectacle and an outrage, emphasizing the nature of the deep difference between themselves and their visitors'.<sup>67</sup> Thanks to Leo, Londoners would be able to assess at first hand the 'notable dexteritie and cunning' of the Moor who will, 'if occasion serve', 'play the theeves most slyly and cunningly'.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Bernard Harris' 1958 essay, which illuminates the chicanery that surrounded the visit, can be found in 'A portrait of a Moor', in *Shakespeare and Race* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 23-36.

<sup>66</sup> Cited in Harris's 'A portrait of a Moor', p. 32.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>68</sup> *History and Description of Africa*, i. 163.

The presence in England of the Moorish ensemble seemed to focus Elizabeth's mind as much on potential targets for deportation as on geo-political cooperation, for throughout the 1590s the polity had been confronted by the deadly combination of an expanding population and ever diminishing resources to feed them. In short, throughout this decade, there was near famine in the realm. Peter Fryer offers another, more insidious, reason for the Queen's intent, no less than, 'the widespread belief, more firmly held than ever in the reign of a virgin queen of exceptional pallor, that whiteness stood for purity, virtue, beauty, and beneficence, whereas anything black was bound to be filthy, base, ugly, and evil'.<sup>69</sup>

An alternative, distinctive skin colour, increasingly visible in Albion, Land of the Whites, proved more facilitative to the purger's cause. On 11 July, 1596, an open letter was sent from Elizabeth to the Lord Mayors of English cities and sheriffs of other major towns in England: 'There are of late divers blackamores brought into this realm, of which kind of people there are already here to manie consideryng howe God hath blessed this land with great increase of people of our nation as anie countrie in the world... Her Majesty's pleasure therefore ys that those kinde of people should be sent forth of the lande'.<sup>70</sup>

'Those kinde of people'. It sounds, to be paradoxical, strangely familiar. A week later an open warrant was issued to mayoral offices and to the Admiralty: 'Whereas the Queen's Majesty is discontented at the great number of "negars and blackamores" which are crept into the realm since the troubles between her Highness and the King of Spain, and are fostered here to the annoyance of her own people... In order to discharge them out of this country, her Majesty hath appointed Caspar Van Zeuden, merchant of Lubeck, for their transportation'.<sup>71</sup> Says Fryer, 'this was an astute piece of business'.<sup>72</sup> Van Zeuden had arranged for the release of eighty-nine English prisoners held in Spain and Portugal. 'Blackamores' were sought in equal number, so that they might fill the white man's shoes in Iberian

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<sup>69</sup> *Staying Power: The history of black people*, p. 10. Fryer suggests a population of 3 million was faced with a series of devastating harvests.

<sup>70</sup> Cited in Walvin, p. 8.

<sup>71</sup> *HMC*, Hatfield House, part XI [1601] (1906), 569, cited in Hadfield (2001), p.4.

<sup>72</sup> *Staying Power*, p. 11.

servitude. Black skin had been used as a ransom; the future liberty of these pawns was knowingly overlooked. And yet, the exercise was clearly a failure: 'As an attempt to ease the nation's social problems, the plans to deport the blacks failed. Negroes were no less in evidence in London in the years after the royal decrees than they had been before'.<sup>73</sup> Peter Fryer thinks it 'failed completely' and affirms that from that day on there has been a continuous black presence in Britain.<sup>74</sup> That the black presence in London had aroused the negative sentiments of the country's highest authority thus becomes the backdrop to the *arrivistes nègres* of the London stage.

It is important to recount the theatrical intersections contemporary to the black retinue's visit: Marlowe was at full-tilt with foreigners such as *Dido, Queen of Carthage* (1586), *Tamburlaine I and II* (1587/1588), and Barabas in *The Jew of Malta* (1589). Robert Greene's *Alphonsus of Aragon* and George Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* had been written and presented at the climax of a xenophobic pamphleteering campaign, Leo Africanus's impressions of Africans were available in translation for the first time to a literate, theatre-attending public, and Thomas Dekker, sitting down to dream up another Moor, needing only, at a slight stretch, to lean out the window to gaze at the intended subject of his creative mind or to withdraw, to read of them in Africanus, the writer who was to become 'the single most important figure to link North Africa and Europe between the years 1500-1800'.<sup>75</sup>

To reiterate my purpose, I wish to analyse an eclectic series of plays that cover Shakespeare's and his contemporaries' dramatic cognition of black skin. I wish to compare the presentation of the black figures on show – both male and female – and attempt to understand discrepancies and disproportions within their fictive beings.<sup>76</sup> In other words to look 'amongst those whose very presence is

<sup>73</sup> Eldred Jones, *Othello's Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama*, p. 9.

<sup>74</sup> *Staying Power*, p. 12.

<sup>75</sup> Oumelbanine Zhiri, 'Leo Africanus's *Description of Africa*', p. 262.

<sup>76</sup> Although Eliot Tokson has calculated representations of black skin in drama between 1550 and 1688 to appear in a total of 29 plays, Thomas L. Berger, to whose work I am much indebted here, accounts for 45 plays alone between 1585-1623, my locus of study in this first chapter. For Tokson's listings, see *The Popular Image*, pp. 139-41. For Berger, see *An Index of Characters in Early*

“overlooked” – in the double sense of social surveillance and psychic disavowal – and at the same time overdetermined – psychically projected made stereotypical and symptomatic’.<sup>77</sup>

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Perhaps to focus Shakespeare’s own fledgling thoughts about black skin, three plays of ‘foreign’ conquest appeared on the stage during the early part of his career. Robert Greene had Arcastus as ‘King of the Moors’ in his 1587 *Alphonsus King of Aragon*, soon to be followed by his own take on Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* (1591), wherein the daughter of the King of Africa is a testo-siren of the first order. George Peele also gave us the more political Muly Muhamet who sows ungodly mayhem in *The Battle of Alcazar* (1589). What binds these plays, apart from their precedential Moorish narratives, is the emphasis on infiltrating, whether by villainy, love or lust, empires that would, but for dramatic necessity, rather have avoided such attention.<sup>78</sup>

Greene’s *Aragon* is nothing more than second-hand *Tamburlaine*.<sup>79</sup> In order to save his own life, Amuracke, ‘the Great Turk’, must agree to wed his daughter, Iphigina, to Alphonsus, heir to the Spanish crown. The deal is that on Amurack’s death, Alphonsus will come to ‘possess the Turkish Emperie’. The key role of Otherness in the play is to supplement a type of pre-Websterian spectacle where The Kings of Barbary, the Moors, Arabia, and Babylon – who otherwise have minor, purely violent actions to perform – are sent to supplicate before God at the ‘Temple of Mahomet’ (1280-1355). ‘The brazen head’ spews flames and wrath and

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*Modern English Drama Printed Plays, 1500-1660*, eds. Thomas L. Berger, William C. Bradford, Sidney L. Sondergard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). I have followed Berger’s categorisations of blackness as plays containing ‘Africans, Ethiopians, Moors, Negro(es) and Numidians’. I have also used Berger’s dates of performance for the plays I will here explore.

<sup>77</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “Race” Time and the Revision of Modernity’, in *Theories of Race and Racism*, eds. Les Back and John Solomos (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 354.

<sup>78</sup> It is also worth pointing out that geographically an ultra-safe distance is maintained: we are still nowhere near Britannia; for this we await the masques and pageant.

<sup>79</sup> For all textual citations, see W.W. Greg’s reprint of *Alphonsus, King of Aragon* [1599] (London: The Malone Society, 1926). The difference in dates between Greg and Berger is noted. John Clark Jordan calls the play an ‘outgrowth from *Tamburlaine*’. See *Robert Greene* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1915), p. 190.

drums 'rumble within'. This spectacle is not only the symbolic essence and nature of the Empire against which the Patriarchy must not cease its fight. The vocalisation of the word of God, speaking through a symbolised 'brazen head' of his Prophet Mohammed in a 'shady grove' is decisive according to the models of demonising darkness we have already discussed.

Despite their prominence in the *Dramatis Personae*, our kings are given no words to speak, their presence on stage suggesting more an arbitrary assortment of diffuse geographies with which to supplement the overarching potency of Alphonsus's virtuous intent (with which *he* can take on the world and win).<sup>80</sup> These black kings' silence is indicative of an undiscovered dramatic voice, or at least any form of oral communication with which to address Empire, of which there is undoubtedly a kind of formation at work: the protagonist unerring, wholesome, and indomitable in his quest for love, the black man – new to dramatic ideology – held in stasis at the behest of idolatry. The divergent characters serve to symbolise as a whole the impotence of foreign theism via their pointless prostrations.

Yet the conclusion of Greene's play does set down a mark which would confound the readers and believers of the tract and the travelogue. The mixed-race marriage will take place and order will be restored. As such, Greene provides purchase *against* the fear of out-breeding, of the mixing of blood that came to dominate much of the pejorative rhetoric that circulated around black concupiscence; the invitation to miscegenate with the Other so as to provide political stability works against the tenor of future black representation, and suggests that ideas of assured infection had not yet permeated the theatrical conscience.

Greene extended his African adventures with the 1591 *Orlando Furioso*,<sup>81</sup> an Ariosto-goes-to-Belmont tale of wooing, with Orlando up against an international

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<sup>80</sup> As a mark of what the actors might have worn, Andrew Gurr avers that '[c]ostumes for "Negro Moors" as Peele called them, were spectacular rather than realistic. None the less, considerable efforts were made on occasions to simulate dark skin and curly hair. Face masks and elbow gloves of velvet, and black leather leggings were topped with "Corled hed Sculles of blacke Laune" in early Court performances'. See *The Shakespearean Stage, 1574-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 199-200.

<sup>81</sup> See *The Historie of Orlando Furioso* [1594] (London: The Malone Society, 1907).

array of royalty, with the Kings of Cuba, Mexico, 'The Isles', and the 'Soldan of Egypt', all competing for the hand of Angelica, daughter of Marsilius, Emperor of Africa. Again, the emphasis on marriage is to find a male successor who 'shall wear the Affricke Crowne' upon the Emperor's demise. Angelica's choice of Orlando provides the dramatic focus of the play, as the contending suitors determine that all-out attack – not mere theo-supplication – is the most just response to spurned advances.

Nothing is made of Angelica's colour, save that she is described as 'the fairest flower' (21). To most, Angelica would be won of martial magnificence, of mighty deeds achieved in the fields of war; Orlando though is in it for love. En route to the assignation, Orlando has passed '[t]he sauage Mores & Anthropagei [sic]', who might well have 'kept me backe' (118-119), and of whom no further mention is made. Colour is pointedly not a feature of *Orlando Furioso*, yet colour, particularly black, would have occupied much of the stage.<sup>82</sup>

For a more stable, recognisable account of blackness, we must turn to George Peele's rallying cry for the continued subordination not of all statuses that attach themselves to the African personage, merely those that arose within martial and valourous story-telling.<sup>83</sup> Peele's play is a dull tale of internecine ravages in royal ranks which 'commemorates the failure (although a heroic one) of English policy in North Africa... with the total defeat of the Portuguese-Moroccan-English alliance and the death of Sebastian and Ahmad'.<sup>84</sup> In *Muly Hamet*, though, Peele brought to 'the popular stage in England a metaphor which, without exaggeration, profoundly and adversely affected the way blacks were to be represented on stage for years to come'.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>82</sup> The play includes the fabulous stage direction, 'Enter Orlando with a leg' (758).

<sup>83</sup> Peele's published title is *The Tragical Battle of Alcazar in Barbary, with the death of three kings and [of] Captain Stukeley an Englishman*. Anthony Barthelemy observes that *Muly Muhamet* was not the first of Peele's Moors, the honour going to the character of 'The Moor' in his 1585 pageant entitled *The Device of the Pageant Borne before the Woolstone Dixi Lord Maior of the Citie of London*. Although a minor ingredient in the pageant, Peele's 'exotic' Moor 'lends an air of cosmopolitan sophistication to the proceedings'. See *Black Face, Maligned Race*, p. 49.

<sup>84</sup> Nabil Mater, *Turks, Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery*, p. 47. Mater dates the battle at 4 August, 1578.

<sup>85</sup> Anthony Barthelemy, *Black Face, Maligned Race*, p. 78. Kim Hall omits to include Peele's play in *Things of Darkness*.

As in *Othello*, we are asked to disapprove of the protagonist long before we see him. The 'Presenter' refers immediately to Muly as 'the barbarous Moor, / The negro Muly Hamet' (1.1.6-7).<sup>86</sup> Six lines on, in the same speech, the Presenter observes that Muly Mollocco – the play's 'usurped prince' – is a 'brave Barbarian lord' (1.1.12). At such times, the modern reader comes to understand the complexity – or arbitrariness – of early modern ideas of category, for 'barbarous' is a pejorative adjective when tacked on to Muly Mahamet, yet 'Barbarian' carries a sense of honour amid the various histories invoked in the phrase. It is fine to come from Barbary, but not to possess its cultural traits. Muly Mahamet is shown 'Black in his look, and bloody in his deeds' (1.1.15). Anthony Barthelemy notes the opportunity available to Peele here, for 'when the audience sees Muly Mahamet behave in a manner in concert with its traditional views of blackness, the metaphor of blackness receives reconfirmation and renewed credibility in the real world'.<sup>87</sup>

Yet the clearest indicator of Peele's personal approach to blackness lies not with his depiction of a lascivious Muly, but with the supposed martial excellence of Muly's dramatic foil, who comes in shape no bigger than one of England's finest, the Mercenary, Sir Thomas Stukeley, a man 'resolved in all / to follow rule, honour, and empery' (2.2.26-9).<sup>88</sup> The 'valiant' Stukeley, comes fully to oppose the vindictive machinations of Peele's Moor, calling as much upon the mythology of Englishness as upon those tested adornments that 'decorate' blackness, here adduced dramatically as never before. The time, it seems, was ripe for such a contest: 'Inspired by the anti-Muslim zeal of their king... Jacobean writers recognized the need for presenting to the English reader and pageant-goer some models of native English heroism in the holy war against the Muslims'.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> All quotations come from *The Battle of Alcazar*, in *The Works of George Peele*, ed. A.H. Bullen, vol. 1 (London: John C. Nimmo, 1888), pp. 221-96.

<sup>87</sup> *Black Face, Maligned Race*, p. 79.

<sup>88</sup> Stukeley himself was, in reality, a less than savoury character, an unlikely hero, to say the least, one who, for his mercenary pursuits, had garnered the wrath of Elizabeth's advisors. So 'while the official view of Stukeley was antipathetic, the popular representation was heroic'. Mater evidences this by contemporaneous citations which decry Stukeley variously as 'a ruffian, a riotous spend-thrift... a notable vapourer... prodigal, false, vile, without faith, conscience or religion' (Mater, p. 48). In order to do down the Moor, Peele had to aggrandize the reputation of his hero. The dramatic disclosure of Muly Muhamet is finessed in opposition to Stukeley's anglicized sense of righteousness.

<sup>89</sup> Nabil Mater, *Turks, Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery*, p. 144.

Although just pre-Jacobean, in Peele's play the anti-Muslim sentiment obtains. Mater goes on to observe that 'for Peele, Stukeley was the model soldier who never compromised his Englishness, even while serving "Lord Mahomet"'.<sup>90</sup> The dramatic revelation of Muly is tied, then, to the actions of an Englishman, a mercenary at that, one who seeks his fortune through war in the Empires of the Other. It is with the respective deaths of the mercenary, Stukeley, and the professed rightful successor to Empire, Muly Mahamet, that Peele offers his most damning reaction to the possibility of black valour.

Stukeley is repeatedly stabbed by two treacherous Italians yet, dying of multiple wounds, he manages to produce for us – less a flash before his eyes, than a patient unfurling – his history to date: 'Hark, friends; and with the story of my life / Let me beguile the torment of my death. / In England's London, lordings, was I born' (5.1.134-6). Thence, in forty-eight lines of self-panegyry, Stukeley recalls for his audience the adventures of a globe-trotting Elizabethan mercenary from 'home' to Ireland, Spain, Rome, Lisbon, and 'Afric',<sup>91</sup> and talks up a storm of righteous achievement before succumbing to the ends of 'Tom Stukeley's earthly pilgrimage' (5.1.180).

Conversely, having declared his intent to escape the battle via the dramatic means reserved for the most brutal of tyrants – 'A horse, a horse, villain, a horse! That I may take the river straight and fly' (5.1.96-7) – Muly falls off and into a 'stream' where he drowns because he cannot swim. We do not witness this perverse – and deeply dishonourable – spectacle, for Muly's comeuppance is only reported, his death in every way an exemplum of a pointlessly evil life. Dympna Callaghan is right to observe that 'dramatic discourse is constructed around certain silences and unrevealed episodes'.<sup>92</sup> With his 'original' interpretation of black skin, Peele incorporates into a triumphalist discourse an aggressive black coward as

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>91</sup> He is alone on stage for his finale.

<sup>92</sup> *Women and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy: A Study of 'King Lear', 'Othello', 'The Duchess of Malfi' and 'The White Devil'* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p. 84. I appreciate that Callaghan writes predominantly of the role of the 'silent' woman in her titled plays; but her generic contention that 'a noble death is constituted by assuming the feminine virtue of silence' seems to work well and subversively in the case of Muly, who is thereby unsexed, as well as dishonoured, silent, and absent.

untrustworthy as his nemesis is valiant, and as pointedly anti-English as the English crown is sacred.

In *Titus Andronicus* (1593), Shakespeare partook of the fashion for black skin with Aaron, who displays all the qualities of the murderous African, but that he is far less prone to the acts of irrationality which characterise his contemporaries. Indeed, Aaron's *modus operandi* revolves not around the influences of the passions that make so unpredictable the actions of his brothers, but through foresight, through 'policy' – the catchword for staged *imbroglio* – and 'stratagem' (1.1.604).<sup>93</sup> A number of commentators have referred to Aaron in terms of his 'Machiavellian mischief', of his attachment to the legacy of characterised political chicanos that include Muly Hamet, Marlowe's Barabas, Shakespeare's Richard, Duke of Gloucester and, later, Iago.<sup>94</sup> Certainly, he shares their vengefulness.

More of a motiveless malignant than even Iago, Aaron's lust for retribution 'seems to have no other bases than the general ones that his fortunes were governed by people of a different race from himself, and that he was alone among them'. Eldred Jones continues that Aaron's 'choice of evil is deliberate' which shows Shakespeare's 'preoccupation with men rather than with types even in this early play'.<sup>95</sup> A secondary preoccupation seems to have been the irony of the black man in a play in which the most wicked crimes emanate from within the white patriarchy;<sup>96</sup> even so, writes John Harvey, 'with his own sarcasm...as one might expect of an African villain on the Elizabethan stage, [Aaron] is presented as wanting, zestfully, to be a black devil'.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>93</sup> Citations are taken from the Arden *Titus Andronicus*, ed. Jonathan Bate (London: Thomas Nelson, 1995).

<sup>94</sup> 'Titus Andronicus', in *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, vol. 6, ed. Geoffrey Bullough (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1996), p. 17. For a reading of Aaron's linguistic debt to Barabas see Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), pp. 81-2; and to Muly, see Bate's introduction in the Arden, p. 88. 'Not far one Muly lives, my countryman: / His wife but yesternight was brought to bed; / His child is like to her, fair as you are' (4.2.154-6).

<sup>95</sup> Eldred Jones, *Othello's Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>96</sup> For a critique of whiteness in *Titus*, see Francesca T. Royster, 'White-limed walls: whiteness and Gothic extremism in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*', in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51 (2000): 432-3; and of blackness, see Jeannette S. White. "'Is black so base a hue?": Shakespeare's Aaron and the politics of race', in *CLA Journal* 40 (1997): 337-67.

<sup>97</sup> John Harvey, *Men in Black* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 108. Harvey's study essentially relates to representations of black clothing in art and literature. In assailing the

Aaron is also smart, persuasive, vicious, unrestrained, free from fears of retribution and beyond pain.<sup>98</sup> Unlike Tamora's sons, he is literate in Latin, recognising both the meaning and implication of Titus's Horatian ode (4.2.20-1). He is proud of his colour, issuing forth in 'Coal-black is better than another hue' an exquisite defence of his chief signifier (4.2.99-105). Bullough reminds us that, in presentation, black skin signifies what it is *not* as much as what it *is*, for Aaron is 'the antithesis of all Christian goodness';<sup>99</sup> this exclusivity in turn invites the exclusive textual disdain held in abeyance for black-skinned characters:

Certainly [Aaron] is labelled with almost every opprobrious name invented by terrified whites for black Africans: 'incarnate devil', 'coal-black moor', 'wall-eyed slave', 'black dog', 'this barbarous Moor, / This ravenous tiger, this accursed devil', 'inhuman dog', 'unhallowed slave', 'misbelieving Moor'... It is, at any rate, the blasphemous black man from... Godless Africa whom Shakespeare intends Aaron to represent – thus suiting the expectations of an audience to whom Moors seemed creatures more diabolical than human.<sup>100</sup>

But those expectations must have been challenged as Shakespeare endows his first attempt at the Moorish Other with a powerful humanity, suggesting that his character is less totalised than Leslie Fielder thought four decades ago. Where Aaron stands out both within *Titus Andronicus* and within the small but expanding canon of Otherness<sup>101</sup> is in his commitment to fatherhood – in a play in which

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signification of Hamlet's 'inky cloak', Harvey extends his query to Shakespeare's more literal use of black in *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello*: 'however self-denying and grave and philosophical the associations of black may be, there is also a recurring connection not only between black and death but more particularly between black and violence (p. 113).

<sup>98</sup> In his search for Aaron's provenance, Bate argues that the Aaron of Exodus, 4.10-16, had an 'eloquent, persuasive tongue' (Arden, p. 125).

<sup>99</sup> 'Titus Andronicus', in *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, p. 21. 'Let fools do good and fair men call for grace, / Aaron will have his soul black like his face' (3.1.205-6).

<sup>100</sup> Leslie Fielder, *The Stranger in Shakespeare* (New York: Stein and Day, 1965), pp. 176-83. To this we can add Bassianus's reflections upon 'his body's hue... Spotted, detested, and abominable' (2.3.72-4). 'Unlike Othello, Aaron is more easily reconciled to the stereotype of black wickedness, lust, and malignity. His unmitigated evil is repeatedly linked to his physical features, both by himself and by others'. See Ania Loomba, *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1989), p. 46.

<sup>101</sup> In *The Merchant of Venice* (1596), a play with alien Jewish custom quite literally at its heart, Shakespeare gives us an ephemeral 'Prince of Morocco', an insecure Alpha-male who comes to Belmont to woo a less-than-impressed Portia. The tetchy 'tawny Moor' immediately defends his colour and within six lines raises with Portia the prospect of marriage to her as a fiery, torturous act of miscegenation: 'let us make incision for your love / To prove whose blood is reddest, [Phoebus] or mine' (2.1.6-7). He is given Othello's loquacity, which he uses to brag about the sexual

fatherhood fails on a calamitous scale – which signifies this outsider's humanity in a bereft Rome and troubles the categorisation of moors as lacking moral scruples. To the Romans, the half-cast son Aaron sires with Tamora is 'our empress' shame', 'as loathsome as a toad / Amongst the fair-faced breeders of our clime', and, most ironic in the play of pagan worship, 'the issue of an irreligious Moor' (4.2.61, 4.2.69-70, 5.3.120). To his father, the boy is 'the vigour and picture of my youth' (4.2.109-10), and 'a young lad framed of another leer' (4.2.121), in whose defence Aaron kills and whom he will defend with his life. Of fatherhood, Aaron's fortune is to end his own racial solitude, finding that 'at last [he] has someone like himself – a part of himself – as an ally against a hostile world',<sup>102</sup> and in the process imprinting upon a wicked Moor an overdue moral framework.

With his own relative stereotypology, Thomas Dekker, like Peele before him, does little to break down concrete notions of morally abandoned blackness.<sup>103</sup> What makes *Lust's Dominion* (1600) worthy of consideration here is its date of performance, which returns us to Elizabeth I's proclaimed distaste for the immigrant, and for her desire that they should be excised from the realm. The play makes clear the potential for political-theatrical imbrication; Dekker advances this with *Lust's Dominion's* cry for ethnic cleansing, a dramatic response to what was an encroaching, political claustrophobia.<sup>104</sup> That into the Spanish court is come an

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promiscuity afforded by his face ('I swear, / the best loved virgins of our clime / Have loved it too' [2.1.9-11]). The Prince announces his impiety (2.7.13), takes sixty lines to choose the wrong casket (largely on the basis of commercial value), and he who in a relieved Portia's eyes briefly 'stood as fair / As any comer I have looked on yet / For my affection' (2.1.21-2) is bid his 'riddance' with the hope that 'all of his complexion' (2.7.79) should forever fail to gain her hand. I am not sure he was given enough to work with, frankly. Switching genders, staying mixed, Shylock's servant, Launcelot, has, according to Lorenzo, succeeded in the 'getting up of the Negro's belly'. Instead of a denial, Launcelot puns, suggests that 'it is much that the Moor should be more than reason' (3.5.35-7), and thus anticipates a bulwark of Enlightenment racial philosophy, some of which we shall see in Chapter II. Citations from *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. W. Moelwyn Merchant (London: Penguin, 1967).

<sup>102</sup> Eldred Jones, *Othello's Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama*, p. 60.

<sup>103</sup> All textual citations are from *Lust's Dominion* [1600], in *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, vol. 4, ed. Fredson Bowers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), pp. 115-230.

<sup>104</sup> As I have said, there seems to have been surprisingly little work carried out on Dekker's play. Neither Kathleen McLuskie, *Dekker and Heywood: professional dramatists* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), nor Julia Gasper, *The dragon and the dove: the plays of Thomas Dekker* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), mentions the play in their work. This may have something to do with the ascription to Marlowe, yet the matter had long been decided by the time these works were

uncontrollable, lust-fuelled Moor bent on corrupting the *sanctum sanctorum* would have alarmed audiences with no other knowledge of power but that it is white and decidedly absolutist.

With Eleazar, Dekker moves us into a 'darkness visible': a complex plot that pitches white against black lasciviousness in its disquisition on the role of lust in the black psyche (or at least this white portrayal of the black psyche). And here we see a new space created in the development of the stage African. To Dekker, the vast dominion of the mind is as important as is the centring of lust in Spain. Eleazar has more to say on this than critics, it would seem. He knows that 'every hissing tongue cries out, There's the Moor, / That's he that makes a Cuckold of our King, / There goes the minion of the Spanish Queen; / That's the black Prince of Divels' (1.1.86-90).

In his blackened context, Eleazar is, confoundingly, untrustworthy while having already – visibly – spurned the queen's advances; he is black, a devil, a slave, and a dog, all before the end of the first scene.<sup>105</sup> Unlike Othello and Muly, who are racially vilified before their entries on stage, and thereby incapable of self-defence, Eleazar fully resists the stereotype. In spurning the queen's motiveless prurience, he visibly denies the oral 'accusations':

*Qu. Mo.* [...] Bestow one smile, one little little smile,  
And in a net of twisted silk and gold  
In all my naked arms, thy self shalt lie.

*Eleazar.* Why, what to do? Lusts arms do stretch so wide,  
That none can fill them! I'le lay there? Away. (1.1.57-62)

Eleazar, contrary to character, is a rationalist, of all things. He understands sexual limitation, and hereby potentially undermines the point of the play – being to ward off blackness – by confirming reality: that 'lust' itself is not to be constrained.

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published. See Charles Cathcart, 'Lust's Dominion, or The Lascivious Queen: Authorship, Date, and Revision', in *Review of English Studies* 52.207 (2001): 360-75.

<sup>105</sup> 1.1.86-90. The influence of Africanus is again in evidence, for 'those kinde of people... by nature... are a vile and base people, being no better accounted of by their governours then if they were dogs' (*History and Description of Africa*, i. 186). Elsewhere (and amongst others), Eleazar is called a 'hel-begotten fiend' (1.2.124), 'Lucifer' (2.1.52), 'base slave' (2.1.55), 'black feind' (3.2.178), 'black divell' (4.1.24), 'Prince of hell' (4.2.32), and 'damned Negro' (4.2.33).

There is clearly a great mythologised danger in 'transmission', which Dekker responds to in a temptation scene in which Eleazar turns his wandering eye to the Infanta of Spain, daughter of the king he has murdered and the queen he sleeps with, and the intended of Hortenzo, whom he has just clapped into a bizarre iron collar. When she threatens him with a knife Eleazar retracts quickly, claiming the exercise was a trick to test her constancy. But the exchange between the two, so redolent of Richard III's seduction of Lady Anne, once again highlights the extreme danger that comes with proximity to the sexualised Other, as he pledges to her without compromise: 'I'll touch you, yes, I'll taint you, see you this, / I'll bring you to this lure' (5.1.280-2).

Of all the dangerous negativity that Dekker circulates around the essence of blackness, none is more prominent than the disabling power of the black gaze, which comes to contrast markedly with the enabling gaze of James VI & I, to which I will return. If the Cardinal is to be believed, Eleazar is a Rider of the Apocalypse, sowing death and fury in the process of looking (and looking alone): 'Why stares this Divell thus, as if pale death / Had made his eyes the dreadfull messengers / To carry black destruction to the world?' (2.1.1-3). The 'world' of this play is the Court. The black gaze is insidious, poisonous, contaminatory: 'Renaissance ideologies of colour ... concurred that blackness was dominant and could contaminate whiteness, rather than the other way round'.<sup>106</sup> Hell, as Sartre might have said, is Other Peoples. That the queen's mind is 'venerous' suggests disease alongside passion, a deep-rooted infestation of the monarchy.<sup>107</sup> The Queen Mother's plea for her lover's accession, for a black, European monarch incapable of 'lightening' the prospects for his nation, comes as a result of her radical 'penetration' by Eleazar.

On which literal subject arises the African penis, with due ribaldry, as handled, so to speak, by the Moor's two black henchmen:

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<sup>106</sup> Ania Loomba, "'Delicious traffick': racial and religious difference on early modern stages", in *Shakespeare and Race*, p. 203.

<sup>107</sup> With its 'Venusian' prefix, the word incorporates venereal disease, lust, and the hunting of wild animals into its semantic codings.

*Baltazar.* Is thy cock ready, and thy powder dry.

*Zarack.* My cock stands pearching, like a cock o'the game, with  
a red cole for his crest instead of a colme; and for my powder  
'tis but touch and take. (3.3.1-4)

The root of sex indeed. Zarack's 'touch and take' throwaway aligns Moorish sexuality with premature orgasm, with deficiency. In any case the forthright gambolling foregrounds Mandeville's ancient 'ballokkes', since 'even before the European encroachment on West Africa, there was a widespread belief that the African possessed an unusually large penis [which] came to form the basis for much sexual excitement, resentment and, ultimately, racial antagonism between black and white'.<sup>108</sup> Eleazar also re-states for the audience the sexual profligacy attributed to the black figure, calling his own Moor attendants 'apes' (1.1.40), which 'were symbolically linked with the devil as well as with lasciviousness', and 'by the 16th century... the emblem of unbridled sexuality'.<sup>109</sup>

Eleazar is no Othello, no burdened outsider; he is not singled out for destruction other than by himself. He dies unrepentant, stabbed by neo-King Philip, blaming the Queen for all sexual enticements (5.3.155-8). No further contamination can take place. But just to be sure, the author's closing couplet returns us to the type of paranoia that had invaded Elizabeth I's court. With his immediate and first royal proclamation, Philip acknowledges the danger that outsiders present as the new king reaffirms his dead sibling's purpose: '[A]nd for this Barbarous *Moor*, and his black train, / Let all Moors be banished from *Spain*' (5.3.183). Far from subtle, yet Elizabeth's desire to rid the realm of 'diverse blackamoors' was equally blunt. Contemporaneous, the two imperatives may well fully coalesce. Undoubtedly though, in *Lust's Dominion*, Dekker comes to dramatise what for Elizabeth was a political desire, a need to lay in cement a social distancing from the poisonous black African.

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<sup>108</sup> James Walvin, *The Negro and English Society, 1555-1945*, p. 22.

<sup>109</sup> Gustav Jahoda, *Images of Savages: Ancient Roots of Modern Prejudice in Western Culture*, pp. 8, 18.

In 1602, Shakespeare, and Venice, were to embrace him again. Having already discussed the confused geographical doctrines which alerted Shakespeare's interest once again to black skin,<sup>110</sup> I will look briefly at his 'Moor of Venice', perhaps the best-travelled, potentially most worldly-wise of all his characters. I will keep my comments brief, as we will be spending a good deal of time with Othello as we proceed.

The appropriative availability of Cinthio's *Gli Hecatommithi* has been well documented,<sup>111</sup> with perhaps the key difference being that 'Cinthio's Moor is a brutal and seedy murderer, Othello a great and respected general who becomes a tragic figure'.<sup>112</sup> Likewise considerable discussion has taken place of Shakespeare's linguistic response to the Italian's dry, plague-inspired, boredom saver, the play being 'notable, however, not for the factual content derived from such sources, but for the language of blackness and sex which was immediately recognized and understood by Shakespeare's audiences'.<sup>113</sup> Walvin goes beyond the playwright's creativity to make a claim for Shakespeare's empiric credentials in this creation: 'Shakespeare's portrayal of black humanity reflects, at one level, the varied character and the subtle social nuances of black experience which he could only have acquired from first-hand knowledge'.<sup>114</sup> In that case, he had also acquired

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<sup>110</sup> In his latest work on the play, *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on William Shakespeare's 'Othello'* (London: Routledge, 2003), Andrew Hadfield contextualizes Shakespeare's knowledge base by reprinting and discussing Thomas Coryat's *Coryat's Crudities* (1611), and Fynes Moryson's *An Itinerary Containing His Ten Yeeres Travell* (1617).

<sup>111</sup> Useful, detailed, and in-depth studies include, derivationally, Norman Sanders' edition of *Othello* for the New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), linguistically, Martin Elliot, *Shakespeare's Invention of Othello: A Study in Early Modern English* (London: Macmillan Press, 1988), and textually, E.A.J. Honigmann, *The Texts of 'Othello' and Shakespearean Revision* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996). A recent addition to Honigmann's analysis can be found in Scott McMillan, 'The Othello Quarto and the "Foul-Paper" Hypothesis', in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51 (2000): 67-85. The differences between the quartos of *Othello* (1622, 1630) and the First Folio (1623) have engendered considerably less excitement than the textual debates that surround, say, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*. Nonetheless, what divergences there are do carry some weight. For example, Hadfield notes that 'the folio version emphasises the sexual references in the play, Brabantio's obsession with Othello's sexual conquest of his daughter, and foregrounds the role of Emilia' (*A Routledge Literary Sourcebook*, p. 37). Of specific differences of understanding of a racial kind, John Harvey, to cite an example, reminds us that "My name" is the Folio reading; the second Quarto has "Her name", and Othello can think of Desdemona, unfaithful, as blackened or black'. See *Men in Black* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 112.

<sup>112</sup> Andrew Hadfield, *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook*, p. 8.

<sup>113</sup> James Walvin, *The Negro and English Society, 1555-1945*, p. 26.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

first-hand knowledge of how to effect a psychological destabilization of the black experience which is, frankly, harder to swallow. Conversely, Karen Newman argues for a decidedly inhumane social nexus between blacks and monsters, that by virtue of his hue, 'Othello is a monster in the Renaissance sense of the word'.<sup>115</sup> John Harvey also reminds us not to get too emotionally attached to the 'tragic figure', in that 'it does also seem to be in Shakespeare's mind that Othello, being an African, does have strongly in him, for all his nobility, the sexual and animal part of man, which, in jealousy, becomes murderously savage'.<sup>116</sup>

Shakespeare's play actually documents the experience in love of a foreign soldier. There are no wars (outside his head) for him to fight; he is instead reduced to telling (Desdemona) and re-telling (the Senate) his valorous history of 'disastrous chances', 'moving accidents', and 'hair-breadth scapes' (1.3.135-7). Othello also differs from his black stage brethren in several key respects: unlike Muly, he displays no sign of treachery, no hint of biting the institutional hand that feeds him; whereas Eleazar could not keep his hands off women, which lust-crazed venality stimulates his downfall, Othello falls into a more considerate, traditional love-match with the Duke's daughter (one wonders how many lies he would have told had I been writing of Dekker's *Moor of Venice*). Unlike the multiple arranged-marriage tradition of his now spurned cultural provenance,<sup>117</sup> Othello is both uxorious and a devoted monogamist. A further sign of Shakespeare's debt to Leo Africanus comes with his insistence on taking his new wife to war: 'When they goe to the warres, each man carries his wife with him, to the end that she may cheer up

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<sup>115</sup> 'And wash the Ethiop white: Femininity and the Monstrous in "Othello"', in *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, eds. Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor (New York: Methuen, 1987), p. 153. For detailed readings of Othello's proximity to the monstrous, see James R. Aubrey, 'Race and the spectacle of the monstrous in *Othello*', in *CLIO* 22 (1993): 221-38, and Mark Thornton Burnett's chapter entitled 'Conceiving "Monsters" in *Othello*', in *Constructing 'Monsters' in Shakespearean Drama and Early Modern Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 95-124.

<sup>116</sup> *Men in Black*, p. 112.

<sup>117</sup> Caryl Phillips makes an interesting (if somewhat *démodé*) point about Shakespeare's provenancing of the Moor: 'There is no evidence of Othello having any black friends, eating any African foods, speaking any other language than theirs. He makes no reference to any family. From what we are given it is clear that he denied, or at least did not cultivate his past'. From 'A black European success', in *The European Tribe* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), p. 51. One wonder whether Phillips is asking too much here, or whether he exposes a gap in Shakespeare's knowledge, some lack he was not prepared to expose to the public.

her good man, and give him encouragement'.<sup>118</sup> As we will see, he will need it, for what lifts Othello above the statuses of his contemporaries is that he is the subject of racial stereotyping from the very person in whom he places his greatest trust, which gives scope to directors and actors either to restate or to disturb the tropes and characteristics of differentiation.

No such latitude exists within Ben Jonson's takes on the Other in the *Masque of Blacknesse* and its sequel, *The Masque of Beauty* (1608). Jonson is specific in his allotments of characteristics. He also suggests a cure for the 'problem' of being black: become white.<sup>119</sup> *Blacknesse* was Ben Jonson's first such work in the genre, and was presented on Twelfth-Night, 1605. In its conception, *Blacknesse* was remarkable in that it pointedly moved away from the tradition of singing and dancing and towards theatricality. Jonson, in his initial outing with Inigo Jones, 'brought the full resources of Italian theatrical machinery into use for the first time on an English stage'.<sup>120</sup> This extended to make-up: black paint was used as a racial palimpsest for the first time by Jonson's exalted actors in *Blacknesse*, where previously, as we have seen, velvet masks, gloves and stockings had served symbolically.<sup>121</sup> Queen Anne prompted the conceit, blacked herself up, and ensured that the performance 'was devised according to her specific stipulations'.<sup>122</sup>

Jonson laboured under further 'stipulations', such as the need to refer to those reporters of race whose exploitative rhetoric came to dominate the representation of

<sup>118</sup> Leo Africanus, *History and Description of Africa*, cited in Hadfield (2001), p. 145.

<sup>119</sup> I will concentrate on *Blacknesse*, as the later *Beauty* proves far less contentious, the demystification already complete. As Stephen Orgel points out, 'at the theatrical climax of "Blacknesse", nothing really happens; and the significant action, the metamorphosis of blackness to beauty, takes place between the masque and its sequel... in which the nymphs are already white when they appear'. See *The Jonsonian Masque* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 128.

<sup>120</sup> Stephen Orgel, 'Introduction', *Ben Jonson: The Complete Masques* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969), p. 4.

<sup>121</sup> Eldred Jones, *Othello's Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama*, p. 121.

<sup>122</sup> Stephen Orgel, 'Marginal Jonson', in *The Politics of the Stuart Court Masque*, eds. David Bevington and Peter Holbrook (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 147. According to Annette-Drew Bear, 'the origin of symbolic facial alteration is the devil's attempt to disguise himself and seduce mankind', and that any form of face painting in Early Modern drama 'reveals an internal moral state'. See *Painted Faces on the Renaissance Stage: The Moral Significance of Face-Painting Conventions* (Cranbury, N.J.: Bucknell University Press, 1994), pp. 35, 13. What makes this worthy of comment is that the queen was six months pregnant at the time of her performance. Although Bear devotes a chapter to Jonson, she excludes the Masques.

blacks on stage. This he acknowledges in his prologue: 'Pliny, Solinus, Ptolemy, and of late Leo the African, remember unto us a river in Ethiopia, famous by the name of Niger, of which the people were called *Nigritae*, now Negroes, and are the blackest nation of the world' (13-19).<sup>123</sup> The foreigners are thus not unhindered, being 'presented as members of another, specifically alien, community through the transgression of the norms of appearance'.<sup>124</sup> Black skin remains permanently subject to the ebb and flow of white socio-political doctrine. Both *Beauty* and *Blacknesse* 'express the ideology of absolutism and glorify the absolute power of the monarch'.<sup>125</sup> Yet within this absolutism lies a deep suspicion of the unknown, of the unquantifiable, of the strangers among us. Jonson will have ugly blackness blanched – disinfected – as it approaches the centre of white power, but before it reaches touching distance.<sup>126</sup>

The masques of *Blacknesse* and *Beauty* are, then, a guide to successful Ethiop blanching in which the River Niger seeks to have his fourteen daughters' 'whiteness' restored. In Britain, Niger's father, Oceanus, tells him that the sun (for which read 'King')<sup>127</sup> has the power to change flesh-tones. Problem solved. They are presented at court and sent away destined to become white. Three years on, those daughters dispossessed are again afloat with four sisters in tow. The black

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<sup>123</sup> There were, perhaps, deeper political qualms about the on-going parliamentary debate over the subsumption of Scotland into England, now that both states had one king. 'Closely linked to these', writes David Smith, was 'the fear that naturalisation of the *Ante-Nati* would cause an influx of Scots into England who would monopolise James's person and take a disproportionate amount of patronage for themselves'. See *The Stuart Parliaments, 1603-1689* (London: Arnold, 1999), p. 105. A representation of how a king might tame an incursion was apposite, it seems.

<sup>124</sup> Clare McManus, "'Defacing the Carcass': Anne of Denmark and Jonson's *The Masque of Blackness*", in *Refashioning Ben Jonson: Gender, Politics and the Jonsonian Canon*, eds. Julie Sanders, Kate Chedgzoy, and Susan Wiseman (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. 102.

<sup>125</sup> Yumna Siddiqi, 'Dark Incontinents: The Discourses of Race and Gender in Three Renaissance Masques', in *Renaissance Drama in an Age of Colonisation*, ed. Mary Beth Rose (Evanston: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library Center for Renaissance Studies, 1992), p. 140.

<sup>126</sup> The Masque genre itself depended for its success upon the employment of emblematics and found itself, in its non-mimetic form of representation, a differentiated dramatic spectacle. We are asked to view 'real people' instead of 'actors'.

<sup>127</sup> Jonathan Goldberg observes that 'in the invention of the masque [*of Blacknesse*] the *roi soleil* promises what the printed text accomplishes: preservation; life beyond death; permanent transformation; the defeat of time. This sun makes day and night one eternal day and transforms black into endless white'. See *James I and the Politics of Literature: Jonson, Shakespeare, Donne, and Their Contemporaries* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), p. 59.

siblings were jealous of their sister's whiteness and demanded to be likewise blanched. 'Night' was also less than content that her shady hue was undesirable, became 'mad to see an Ethiop washed white' (67), and detained the boat party on an island. Rescue and eighteen *laissez-passeurs* are provided by Aethiopia and the sorority arrives to some fanfare in Britain, 'the place by destiny fore-meant / Where they should flow forth' (137-8). Such a synopsis hardly does credit to what, for *Blacknesse* at least, 'was at once the most abstruse and the most spectacular masque England had ever seen. Moreover, the way the masque employed its noble participants was considered to border on the scandalous'.<sup>128</sup>

That employment was registered by the author, who carefully noted which ladies performed which roles.<sup>129</sup> That employment would also have been an act of provocation, an unsettling ideological assault when the 'embodiments of beauty are characterized by that quality which to the Elizabethans was a synonym for ugliness'.<sup>130</sup> Sir Dudley Carlton expressed reactionary displeasure at the spectacle, played out, as it was, before the Spanish Ambassador:

Instead of Vizzards, their Faces and Arms up to the elbows, were painted black, which was Disguise sufficient, for they were hard to be known... you cannot imagine a more ugly sight, then a troop of lean-cheek'd Moors... Theyr black faces, and hands which were painted and bare up to the elbows, was a very loathsome sight, and I am sory that strangers should see owr court so strangely disguised.<sup>131</sup>

Even the *illusion* of a power that dissipates even as it blackens is simply bad. P.R. Jonson docks the daughters in 'a court that is an idealized England, allowing no conflict and no misrule',<sup>132</sup> and creates a murky confluence, not just of races but of protocol, 'a living reversal of prevailing English values of beauty and

<sup>128</sup> Eldred Jones, *Othello's Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama*, p. 120.

<sup>129</sup> The twelve were: The Queen, The Countess of Bedford, Lady Herbert, The Countess of Derby, Lady Rich, the Countess of Suffolk, Lady Bevill, Lady Effingham, Lady Elizabeth Howard, Lady Susan de Vere, Lady Wroth, and Lady Walsingham. See *Blacknesse*, 244-61.

<sup>130</sup> Orgel (1965), p. 120.

<sup>131</sup> From *Memorials of Affairs of State in the Reigns of Queen Elizabeth and King James I, collected (chiefly) from the papers of Sir Ralph Winwood*, [1725], vol. II, pp. 43-4, cited in *Othello's Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama*, p. 33. Clare McManus refers to Carleton's 'emotional violence' in his dispraise of the spectacle. See 'Defacing the Carcass', p. 104.

<sup>132</sup> Stephen Orgel, *The Jonsonian Masque*, p. 120.

goodness'.<sup>133</sup> Kim Hall observes that '[The] notion of Africa's rivers (chiefly the Nile), which regularly overflow their boundaries, becomes a source of fascination for the English and is often conflated with the sense of Africans as a people who resist boundaries and rule'.<sup>134</sup>

As Jonson will have it, the *Nigritae* are forced to seek out the *locus* of whiteness in order to change colour and have their purity restored. Its epicentre is the king's 'sciential' gaze, which alone 'can salve the rude defects of every creature' (226-7).<sup>135</sup> Once the distressed daughters of Niger come 'boldly to the shore' to visit the Royal *Hamartia* surgeon, we learn that 'their beauties ... be scorched no more' (233). Aethiopia's description of Britannia as '[a] world divided from the world' (218) is geographic, of course: Britannia is irrefutably surrounded by water. But the division also obtains ideologically, with an immovable, misplaced understanding of the value and worth – not to mention the indelibility – of these strangers from another world, forced, as they are, to come to this first-world for their literal enlightenment: 'Yield, night, then to the light, / As blackness hath to beauty, / Which is but the same duty' (*Beauty* 240-2).

Into those same waters floated Thomas Middleton's 'King of the Moors' in the pageant, *The Triumph of Truth* (1613),<sup>136</sup> in which black royalty trips the light sciential on board a ship on the Thames, alongside a cast of hundreds and before an audience of thousands. The event itself was a super-paeon for the annual induction of the Lord Mayor of London, in this case Middleton's exact yet knighted namesake, Sir Thomas Middleton.<sup>137</sup> Because of its pageant form – and therefore the free access available to one and all – the dialectic of public / private brings to bear its own stringencies on the representation of the African.

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<sup>133</sup> James Walvin, *The Negro and English Society, 1555-1945*, p. 22.

<sup>134</sup> *Things of Darkness*, p. 27.

<sup>135</sup> The king's purifying gaze diametrically opposes Eleazar's infectious stare.

<sup>136</sup> See *The Works of Thomas Middleton*, vol. 7, ed. A.H. Bullen (London: John C. Nimmo, 1886), pp. 229-62.

<sup>137</sup> In Middleton's own prologic words, 'A solemnitie unparalleld... at the Confirmaiton and Establishment of that Worthy and true Nobly-minded Gentleman, Sir Thomas Middleton, Knight; in the Honorable Office of his Maiesties Lieutenant, the Lord Maior of the thrice Famous City of London' (229).

The pageant was a street affair, a play-on-the-move, unlike the Regal-centric Masque. That said, 'English civil pageantry presents a dramatic form which Shakespeare and his contemporaries knew well and which doubtless exerted an influence on their dramatic endeavours'. David Bergeron goes on to affirm that this Lord Mayor's Show is, like the court masque, imbued with the 'thematic, symbolical, allegorical, and emblematic nature of the [masque] entertainments'.<sup>138</sup> Nancy E. Wright, however, argues that the two are separate traditions.<sup>139</sup> Theodore Leinwand presumes 'that the City's shows were rivals to the court's masques, the two competing with each other...to impress their respective magnificence upon their constituencies'.<sup>140</sup> Yet no critic contests the argument that pageants 'were quite clearly offerings to the monarch'.<sup>141</sup>

The fluid narrative shows Mother London gifting her city to the incoming Mayor. *Truth*, very much a 'peripatetic morality play',<sup>142</sup> follows a Manichean struggle between Zeal, Error, Envy, and Mother London herself, before concluding with spectacular effects on the Thames, again, as with Jonson, the arterial vein that leads to justice and peace.<sup>143</sup> In contrast to Jonson, Middleton will have the white gaze returned by the black: 'I see amazement set against the faces / Of these white people', exclaims his Moorish King. 'Does my complexion draw / So many Christian eyes, that never saw / A king so black before?' (247-248). Daryl W. Palmer sees this as the Moor 'realis[ing] that his presence is but an ornament'.<sup>144</sup>

That the Moor is not spectacularised beyond his co-performers is significant. Neither is the Moorish ensemble required to change their colour, either physically or metaphorically. The black king cannily recognises his 'status' within the hierarchy in which he floats, resorting to benevolence and compassion for those

<sup>138</sup> *English Civic Pageantry, 1558-1642* (London: Edward Arnold, 1971), p. 2.

<sup>139</sup> "'Rival Traditions': civic and courtly ceremonies in Jacobean London", in *The Politics of the Stuart Court Masque*, pp. 197-217.

<sup>140</sup> 'London Triumphant: the Jacobean Lord Mayor's Show', in *Clio* II (1982): 149.

<sup>141</sup> David Lindley, 'Introduction', in *The Court Masque* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 3.

<sup>142</sup> *English Civic Pageantry*, p. 180.

<sup>143</sup> The pageant was, according to Bergeron, the most lavish and expensive of the Renaissance. See *English Civic Pageantry*, p. 179.

<sup>144</sup> 'Merchants and Miscegenation: *The Three Ladies of London*, *The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice*', in *Race, Ethnicity, and Power in the Renaissance*, ed. Joyce Green MacDonald (London: Associated University Presses, 1997), p. 61.

who would be fooled by hue: 'I forgive the judgings of th' unwise, / Whose censures ever quicken in their eyes, / Only begot of outward form and show' (248). In *Truth* Middleton, unlike Jonson, refuses to imbue the African presence with a predominantly externalised opprobrium, a colour-clash that needs quick-fixing, which comes as something of a triumph for black representation.

Exterior colouring proved far more problematic for John Marston in 1605. Ostensibly a play that imports into the far-flung Roman Empire of North Africa the intrigue of Central Office,<sup>145</sup> *Sophonisba, or The Wonder of Women* relies upon the dramatized dialectic of male 'Stoicism' in the face of female 'Irrational Lust'; and not without success: T.S. Eliot declared *Sophonisba* to be 'the most nearly adequate expression of [Marston's] distorted and obstructed genius' as well as being 'the one play which he seems to have written to please himself'.<sup>146</sup> Ejner J. Jensen thinks the play is the 'most profound expression of Marston's tragic vision',<sup>147</sup> and John Scott Colley admires Marston's drama because it 'probed the depths of the human personality and found dark, twisted elements even in the best of men'.<sup>148</sup> The central opposition of the play is laid out by the Prologue, who speaks as he rests between the warring parties:

Then in this Carthage Sophonisba lived,  
The far-famed daughter of Great Asdrubal;  
For whom, 'mongst others, potent Syphax sues,  
And well-graced Massinissa rivals him,  
Both princes of proud sceptres; but the lot  
Of doubtful favour Massinissa graced;  
At which Syphax grows black; for now the night  
Yields loud resoundings of the nuptial pomp. (Prologue 8-15)<sup>149</sup>

<sup>145</sup> Marston's sources for Carthagenia were historical, both Livy and Appian having called upon the characters here in their accounts of the Second Punic Wars. Appian's *Roman History* had been translated into English by 'W.B.' in 1578, and Livy's *History of Rome* by Philomen Holland in 1600.

<sup>146</sup> Which, as Eliot's praise goes, is most nearly adequate. See 'John Marston', in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932), pp. 230, 233.

<sup>147</sup> *John Marston, Dramatist: Themes and Imagery in the Plays* (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik Universität Salzburg, 1979), pp. 107, 120.

<sup>148</sup> *John Marston's Theatrical Drama* (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik Universität Salzburg, 1974), p. 168.

<sup>149</sup> All quotes are taken from *Sophonisba*, in *The Selected Plays of John Marston*, eds. Macdonald P. Jackson and Michael Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 397-481.

The four figures named above are all black, all being Libyans, Numidians, and Barbarians. Yet only Syphax is 'potent', only he 'grows black'. Peter Ure points out that '[f]or practical purposes, of course, Marston makes no distinction between the African and the Roman characters...and we are conveniently allowed to forget that Massinissa's face must have been, like Othello's, black'.<sup>150</sup> Within this Roman pagan order, blackness is no threat unless 'degree' be ignored. The benchmark of propriety is Sophonisba herself; her situation, though, is highly unusual. She endures another example of Renaissance *coitus interruptus* on her wedding night: her virtue remains intact as Massinissa, *ante defloratio*, is called from the field of dreams to the field of war. This leaves Sophonisba in a state of complex liminality, simultaneously a 'maid, a widow, yet a hapless wife' (2.2.153).

She is also subject to male politics: for the sake of patriarchal expediency she is to renounce Massinissa's stoic love in favour of Syphax's lust, and to relocate to Syphax's palace at Circa. Thus will the play's symbolic binaries be forced together, with repellent attraction. Marston aligns them with alarming sexual violence: '*SYPHAX, his dagger twon about her hair, drags in SOPHONISBA in her nightgown petticoat; and ZANTHIA and VANGUE following*'. The delightful image is matched by Syphax and the school of soft knocks: 'Look, I'll tack thy head / To the low earth, whilst strength of two black / knaves Thy limbs all wide shall strain' (3.1.8-11).

To bring his anger to bloody fruition, Syphax is ably assisted by his two Moorish servants: Vangue, who sleeps with his master in the play's first bed-trick,<sup>151</sup> and Zanthia, black, bawdy, available at a price, and the dramatic foil to the chaste and confused Sophonisba. Zanthia has 'a legitimate function as a maid and an illegitimate one as a bawd and/or whore',<sup>152</sup> and symbolises 'the tendency towards sexuality which seems to underlie the treatment of Moorish women in

<sup>150</sup> 'John Marston's "Sophonisba": a reconsideration', in *Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama: Critical Essays by Peter Ure*, ed. J.C. Maxwell (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1974), p. 78.

<sup>151</sup> For which queer presumption Vangue – Syphax's 'dear Ethiopian Negro' (1.2.60) – is stabbed to death in a further flurry of irrational penetrations and so 'metaphorically, completes the bed-trick'. See Marliss C. Desens, *The Bed-Trick in English Renaissance Drama: Explorations in Gender, Sexuality, and Power* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994), p. 95.

<sup>152</sup> Kim F. Hall, "'I would rather wish to be a black-moor": Beauty, race, and rank in Lady Mary Wroth's *Urania*', in *Women, 'Race,' and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, p. 184.

several plays of the period'.<sup>153</sup> Given the rampant sexual opportunism that will have a black servant reduce herself to the status of an animal in return for lucre (3.1.60-68), it is not surprising that critics have turned to Marston's one-dimensional, yet highly persuasive portrayal of concupiscence unbound: 'Zanthia is but the first black woman abstracted to a symbol of lust and sin. Yet she represents more than her sin and the villain's; she also represents a threat to innocence and virtue',<sup>154</sup> and by ideologic extension, she 'raises again the questions of the safety of a community that openly admits Africans'.<sup>155</sup>

The play's purity, Sophonisba, threatens to kill herself rather than succumb to Syphax's wily charms; but she has a necrophiliac on her hands, one only too content, 'without resistance, thy trunk prostitute / Unto our appetite' (4.1.57-61). The black man on stage threatens the most transgressive of all sexual practices, an abhorrent irreverence for the Jacobean audience.<sup>156</sup> *Sophonisba*, though, is not a play that highlights black skin as undesirable; rather that only from within the black body can such havoc arise, fury-like, revenge-bound. Sophonisba is black, she represents a moral immovability and poisons herself rather than yield to the foul form of Syphax. Syphax, a black Don Juan, is a chancer whose only use for rationality lies in the planning of havoc which, as havoc will have it, returns to drag him to hell.

In Zanthia, theatre saw a destructive combination of gender and race, 'for it is in the person of the black woman that [early modern] culture's pre-existing fears

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<sup>153</sup> Eldred Jones, *Othello's Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama*, p. 77. The recurrent name 'Zanthia' itself yields an undercurrent: It is an extraction from the Greek feminine of xanthos, 'yellow', and has specific reference to fair, golden hair. It is thought that Zanthia (or a derivative) was the name of Solomon's first (and black) seductress in The Book of Solomon. Berger had Zanthias in *Sophonisba*, Massinger's *The Bondman*, and *The Knight of Malta*; there is also the lascivious 'Zanche, a Moor', in Webster's *The White Devil*.

<sup>154</sup> Barthelemy, *Black Face, Maligned Race*, p. 126. Of the period's drama, Madelon Gohlke writes that when 'women are classed as prostitutes and treated as sexual objects, it is because they are deeply feared as sexually untrustworthy, as creatures whose intentions and desires are fundamentally unreadable'. See "'I wooed thee with my sword': Shakespeare's Tragic Paradigms', in *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, eds. Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980), p. 153.

<sup>155</sup> *Black Face, Maligned Race*, p. 126.

<sup>156</sup> Marston has something of a morbid fetish for black sex with the dead. See Syphax's outrageous description of Eriotho at 4.1.109-21, so Aaron-like in its grave-robbing relish. (I refer to Aaron's own predilection for newly-deads at 5.1.135-40 of *Titus Andronicus*.)

about the female sex and gender dominance are realized'.<sup>157</sup> In positioning the black woman within this gender-phobic culture, a brief exploration of John Fletcher's *Monsieur Thomas* (1615), Fletcher and Beaumont's *The Knight of Malta* (1618), and William Rowley's *All's Lost by Lust* (1619) will show that all is not lost, and that these representations come to oppose and dispatch the *inevitability* of black stereotypologies of concupiscence as a desired end, of the outer as Platonic determinant of the inner.

Essentially a farce *avant le Goldsmith*, the sexually driven Thomas of John Fletcher's *Monsieur Thomas* (1615)<sup>158</sup> at one point disguises himself as a maid so as to sneak between the sheets of his beloved Mary's bed. In the bed, though, is Mary's maid, 'Kate', disguised as a *black More*.<sup>159</sup> Kate has been blacked-up for bed-trickery while Thomas's sister, Dorothy, and Mary look on as hidden voyeurs. Female chastity, 'central to many representations of sexuality in the drama of Beaumont and Fletcher's period [and] often handled as the site for possession between men, a perishable commodity whose market value can all too easily be ruined',<sup>160</sup> is dealt with farcically: a cross-dressed white man who would 'unknowingly' possess a cross-coloured/gendered 'Kate' in front of his own sister speaks much for the licentious and titillating ribaldry that suited the taste of later Jacobean audiences.

Upon discovery, voyeurs move in, demanding of the terrified 'Moore' 'what said he to thee?' (5.5.40); 'that "I had a soft bed"' is the reply. 'Ye may bake me now', says 'Kate the Moor', 'for o' my conscience, he has made me venison' (5.5.47-48). This inversion of normative culinary colour codes – bake me from black to white – and sexual punning creates symbolic confusion.<sup>161</sup> Blackness is not

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<sup>157</sup> Lynda E. Boose, "'The Getting of a Lawful Race': Racial discourse in early modern England and the unrepresentable black woman", in *Women, 'Race,' and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, pp. 45-6.

<sup>158</sup> *The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon*, ed. Fredson Bowers, vol. 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 415-540.

<sup>159</sup> See 5.5.

<sup>160</sup> Sandra Clark, *The Plays of Beaumont and Fletcher: Sexual Themes and Dramatic Representation* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 24.

<sup>161</sup> Earlier on an equally libidinous 'Hylas' uses culinary imagery to impute cuckoldry: 'me thinks ever / Another mans cooke dresses my dyet neatest' (2.3.109-10). No doubt the actor toyed with the pronunciation. In *A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart*

Kate's remorse; rather, the dramatised shift from purity to blemish is her chief lament. The notion of blackness may have terrified the humbled Thomas, but serving as no more than a disguise for its wearer, it fails to register on the gendered conscience.

As if in opposition, *The Knight of Malta* (1618) does much to give substance to the dangerous and unknowable black female, who here becomes a figure of black defiance, of willed non-submission to the lecherous white patriarchy. Although Lawrence B. Wallis doubts 'whether deeply serious moral standards are applicable' to the play,<sup>162</sup> Zanthia's handling, like Kate's masking, similarly effaces difference.

Mountferrat orders his servant, Rocca, to 'find the Blackamore... / Bring her unto me, she doth love me yet, / And I must her now, at least seeme to do' (1.1.89-91). He lacks all control and any palliative to his unruly urges. Zanthia, though, is aware of the likely consequences of his advances: 'Like a property, when I have serv'd / Your turns, you'll cast me off, or hang me up / for a signe, somewhere' (1.1.159-61; 1.1.166-9).<sup>163</sup> Mountferrat makes no discrimination in colour: 'What difference twixt this Moore, and her faire Dame? / Night makes their hues alike, their use is so, / Whose hand so subtile, he can colours name, / If he do wink, and touch 'em? Lust being blind, / Never in woman did distinction find' (1.1.221-5). The argument proposes the relative safety of cross-breeding; the danger lying not in the colour of the quarry, but in the colour of the hunter's mind, for which announcement we can look back to Robert Greene, some thirty years before.

Although Abdella / Zanthia's sexual availability is never in doubt, her role is intriguing,<sup>164</sup> and certainly one of strength: aware of the suppositions attached to both her gender and her colour, she says to Mountferrat: 'and since I know / I am us'd only for a property, / I can, and will, revenge it to the full' (4.1.85-6). Where Mountferrat wants her arbitrarily for her availability, she wants a blood-tie.

*Literature*, vol. 3 (London and Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Continuum, 1994), Gordon Williams refers to venison as 'sexual quarry' (p. 1473). Fletcher's use of the image, not mentioned in this otherwise exhaustive work, would place it among the earliest in representative drama.

<sup>162</sup> *Fletcher, Beaumont & Company: Entertainers to the Jacobean Gentry* (New York: Octagon Books, 1968), p. 230.

<sup>163</sup> Perhaps outside a Low Countries' Apothecary.

<sup>164</sup> She is almost certainly the first black woman in literature to shoot a white man, Gamora the recipient of buckshot in the arm. See 4.4.18.

Although she could be describing a game of 'Twister', at the very least Zanthia seeks some common understanding, some physical sanctity for the proposed congress: 'come Mountferrat, / Here joyne thy foote to mine, and let our hearts / Meet with our hands; the contract that is made / And cemented with blood, as this of ours is' (4.4.28-31).

The prominent black characters in William Rowley's *All's Lost by Lust* (1619)<sup>165</sup> are Mully Mumen, 'King of the Moores',<sup>166</sup> and Fidella, a moor who waits upon Antonio's wife, Margaretta. Seemingly an unlikely combination of both 'trust' and 'infidel', Fidella is steadfast and loyal, offering her life in place of her mistress's, and helping her mistress strangle to death he who they both take to be the treacherous Antonio (but is, in fact Antonio's 'minion', Lazarello). The deed done, Fidella is given gold and disappears from the play.<sup>167</sup> Yet the minor role of Fidella promotes a non-sexualised, obeisant moor, her body not stationed as a site of wonder or expectation, her 'self' separated from the violence perpetrated at the denouement by her notorious countryman.

Mully, as the new King of Spain, demands the body of his rival's raped daughter when, until now, his role had been of a valourous disciplinarian.<sup>168</sup> Given his chance, though, he bizarrely orders that Iacinta's tongue be torn out and her father be blinded (5.5.39-41).<sup>169</sup> Not satisfied, he challenges Iulianus to a running dual; both will be armed and run at one another. And not convinced of the handicap that blindness will bring, Mully uses Iacinta, at the last moment, as a human shield,

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<sup>165</sup> William Rowley, *A Tragedy Called All's Lost By Lust* [1619], ed. Charles Wharton Stork (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1910), pp. 69-153. Stork believes the play to have premiered in 1622, while Berger's more contemporary scholarship suggests 1619. Otherwise, Stork's introduction to the play (pp. 69-71) is strong on Rowley's potential sources for *All's Lost*.

<sup>166</sup> 'King of Africa' in the DP.

<sup>167</sup> Rowley's play also contains a highly unusual dream scene in which the matriarch makes love to Fidella. Although this latter, self-reported (and invisible) conceit is premised on black skin being unconsciously understood as white, its very distribution to the audience attests to sexual possibility beyond patriarchal control, yet sheathed in a dream.

<sup>168</sup> Mully is Aaronesque in his commitment to the indelibility of his skin: 'we that are stamp't with thine owne seale, / Which the whole ocean cannot wash away: / Shall those cold ague cheeks that nature moulds / Within her winter's shop, those smooth white skins, / That with a palsey hand she paints the limbs, / Make us recoyle' (2.3.1-9). This is a neat and rare inversion of white perception of blackness, one that asks us to look to nature's faults in white skin, agued and palsied, lifeless like winter.

<sup>169</sup> Note the Lavinia/Gloucestre troping here.

to be run through by her own father, effecting an incestuous, penetrative consummation. Spain falls at self-behest; the realm implodes again. But the role of the African is far less unstable than Spain's own instabilities.<sup>170</sup> Although Karen Bamford is correct to note that 'there is no sense of renewal at the close...Rowley represents Mulumumen as an archvillain, an anti-Christ [and the play ends] with a sombre vista of Christian servitude to the infidel',<sup>171</sup> the critic – seeming to forget that there are two moors and not one in this play – goes on to add in a footnote that 'Rowley's presentation of the Moor seems unambiguous to me'.<sup>172</sup>

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In this opening chapter we have come to see how the cross-breeding that took place between the twin mythologists, traveller and dramatist, came to incorporate all that had remained stable since Mandeville and his own ancient informants. Mandeville it was who noted the sexual *largesse*; Leo Africanus added the complexities of 'modest behaviour' and 'jealousie'; Hakluyt's voluminous reportages reiterated the climatologic deficiencies of the African, while Samuel Purchas came to place the imperial seal of approval on these immoveable, mental mannequins. Dramatically, in the near four decades between Greene's idolatrous beginnings, through Peele and Dekker's unconscionable violence and lasciviousness, there came to the stage not one essential characterisation as such, but several, like the Zanthias who are provoked to react against the call of patriarchy, and who form their own standard of 'repression containment', or Aaron as proud father, or the unassailable Sophonisba.

Playwrights did indeed conform; but not content with monolithic hand-me-downs, they also challenged both source and authority. The symbioses of stage black/white creation yielded diverse structural paradigms, serving as best evidence of the unsettled creative response to s/he who would be 'auto-assumed' as soon as

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<sup>170</sup> No funeral rites were available to Tamora, Queen of the Goths, yet Mully's first act as King is to take the littered bodies and '[G]ive them to Christians, and let them bestow / What ceremonious funerals they please'. A kind of tolerance exists, at least in Rowley's attempt to mark the African with virtue not merely vice.

<sup>171</sup> *Sexual Violence on the Jacobean Stage* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), p. 111.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198n. 78.

seen on stage. Much of the material I have covered fits perfectly into colonialism's anti-paradigm, created by Anwar Abdel Malek, and reproduced by Edward Said in his own plea for the dispossessed:

On the level of the position of the problem, and the problematic...the Orient and Orientals [are considered by Orientalism] as an 'object' of study, stamped with an otherness – as all that is different, whether it be 'subject' or 'object' – but of a constitutive otherness, of an essentialist character...This 'object' of study will be, as is customary, passive, non-participating, endowed with a 'historical' subjectivity, above all, non-active, non-autonomous, non-sovereign with regard to itself; the only orient or Oriental or 'Subject' which could be admitted, at the extreme limit, is the alienated being, philosophically, that is, other than itself in relationship to itself, posed, understood, defined – and acted – by others.<sup>173</sup>

This was the welcome that awaited 'those kind of people' when they appeared in the fictions of theatre – played by painted white people, pretending – and as they walked the streets of London with as much curiosity for their strange surroundings as they themselves received from a strange, suspicious population. The home-grown conditions, when tested, yielded, but not wholly: the African was to be socially and literarily circumscribed by the curious paradox that obtains when the said subject is so new and yet so known.

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<sup>173</sup> Anwar Abdul Malek, 'Orientalism in Crisis,' in *Diogenes* 44 [1963]: 107-8. Cited in Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 97.

**Chapter II**  
**'To be, and not to be, that a Negro is not a Man':**  
***Othello* and the Politics of Temporal Re-assignment**

Othello's history redounds to the contradictory. John Locke's percipient summation of a questionable enquiry places Shakespeare squarely on the turf of eighteenth-century empiricism, and the implications of this renowned philosopher's *dictum* were to stalk Othello through the construction of the British Empire.<sup>1</sup> The Moor's commentators, whom I will now pursue, were largely faced with the same Lockean dilemma: how could Othello's nobility, come from the hands of the nation's literary giant, retain any meaning for the English if its bearer was the same colour as a slave? What I would like to do here is to fuse a number of performers of Othello to their day's critics and to assess just how each engaged with and produced the deceitful legacies of Chapter I.

In attempting to track in one chapter the critical shadowing of Othello up to the twentieth century, I am clearly constrained.<sup>2</sup> I think the most expedient manner of revealing key racialised tropings is for me to remark upon a number of synchronic binaries created in the search for Moorish credibility. In calling upon actors and critics within key time capsules,<sup>3</sup> I will also attempt effectively to span eras by inserting contextual discourse surrounding the black presence, and emanating simultaneously to performance. This will incorporate some further words on slavery, and interjections on racial categorisation and canonisation, the noble savage and the 'Romanticisation' of Othello, and minstrelsy, white power's blanket response to burgeoning black emancipation. This way I hope to build as full a picture as possible of the conditions attached to both criticism of *and* performance by the character of Othello. I will close with an introduction to *Othello* on film, mapping the tropes carried over from the Victorian era, themselves products of mutating stereotypes within unpredictable historic discourses. I will commence though with a brief discussion of the Restoration era's acceptance and transmission

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<sup>1</sup> John Locke, *An Essay on the Human Understanding* [1690], 2 vols. (London: Ward, Lock, & Co., 19--), ii. 518. The latter publication date is incomplete.

<sup>2</sup> A full exposition of the nature of this chapter would clearly warrant more space. In adhering to imposed limits, I have necessarily excluded a large amount of material.

<sup>3</sup> Given the focus of my material, these dates are approximately 1663-1710, the 1740s, 1790-1833, 1860-81.

of black racial mythologies, using as a political conduit the figure of the Moor. This was a period of both awe at the spectacle of blackness and, more notably, of two critics' disgust at its use, one of whom produced a fine *volte-face* for Shakespeare.

For Locke's early 'To Be' camp, Thomas Rymer thought the 'Negro'-as-General, 'a man of strange Mettle'.<sup>4</sup> And for team 'Not To Be', Samuel Pepys, the great archivist of the quotidian, recorded in 1663 his own fascinations with these same strange mettles: 'So to Greenwich; and had a fine pleasant walk to Woolwich, having in our company Captain Minnes... Among other things, he and the other Captains that were with us tell me that Negroes drowned look white and lose their blacknesse – which I never heard before'.<sup>5</sup> Two-and-a-half years later, is reported something which Pepys had most likely never seen before: '[Sir Robert Vyner] showed me a black boy that he had that died of a consumption; and being dead, he caused him to be dried in a Oven, and lies there entire in a box'.<sup>6</sup> Quite why Sir Robert chose to store the *disjecta membra* of former staff in this way is yet to come down to us. What is clear though is that by committing this half-baked spectacle to print, Pepys added to the ongoing investigation into what it meant, from a white perspective, to be black. Such a spirit of enquiry perhaps explains why the story of the black man with the white wife remained very much in demand in the century after its re-birth. Gary Taylor reminds us that '*Othello*, *The Moor of Venice*, and the first part of *King Henry the Fourth* were quoted or mentioned more often in the seventeenth century than any other texts of Shakespeare'.<sup>7</sup>

As far as we know, Nicholas Burt (1660-c.1669), Charles Hart (c.1674-82), and Thomas Betterton (1682-1709),<sup>8</sup> were Restoration London's Chief Keepers of

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<sup>4</sup> *A Short View of Tragedy, Its Original Excellence, and Corruption. With Some Reflections on Shakespeare, and other Practitioners for the Stage* [1693], in *The Critical Works of Thomas Rymer*, ed. Curt A. Zimansky (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1956), p. 141.

<sup>5</sup> *The Diary of Samuel Pepys: a new and complete transcription*, eds. R.C. Latham & W. Matthews, 11 vols. (London: Bell, 1970-1983), iii. 63.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 September, 1665, vi. 215. The only record we have of Pepys in the audience for *Othello* comes on 6 February, 1669. From an upper box in the King's Playhouse he saw a Moor of Venice that was 'ill acted in most parts' (ix. 438).

<sup>7</sup> *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1990), p. 28. (Not including adaptations.) Taylor also reports that *Othello* was issued in quarto editions in 1681, 1687, 1695, and 1705 (p. 32).

<sup>8</sup> I am grateful for Julie Hankey's 'Chronological Table of Performances of *Othello*', in *Plays in Performance: 'Othello', William Shakespeare* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1987), pp. viii-ix. Emmet Avery tells us that Betterton played *Othello* on 21 May, 1703, 19 Feb, 1704, 27 April, 1704,

the Spotted Handkerchief, and that ‘the slim but suggestive evidence about Restoration performance indicates, in sum, that Hart and Betterton’s portrayal privileged the noble Moor and repressed his savagery. Despite his blackness, he was part of the aristocracy, not marginalised from it’.<sup>9</sup> This implicitly raises the issue of skin colour. As an African, Othello was a signifier of England’s heavy involvement in the slave trade – the colour coding for human abjection. Yet to some, ‘such economic activity did not preclude the stage presence of a noble black African hero’.<sup>10</sup> That very on-stage ‘aristocracy’ was represented in and by the theatre-going public, and considerable debate ensued about Othello’s ‘rights’ as a black African, for blackness was no longer sole property of the dilettante scientist: the drama critic had come for his cut.

The late-seventeenth-century question whether Othello himself was a reasonable dramatic being arose naturally from Thomas Rymer’s dissection in 1693 of the play’s contraventions of French rationalism, so sharply divergent was *Othello* from the precise, unifying contiguities of neo-Classicism.<sup>11</sup> Rymer’s most famous work sought to ‘champion French taste against English’, which might explain why ‘the outrage occasioned by Rymer’s *A Short View of Tragedy* provides the most conclusive proof of the Restoration’s ambivalence toward neoclassical theory’.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, in *A Short View*, Rymer set out to prove ‘that the English had a better language and greater potentiality than other nations’.<sup>13</sup>

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25 December, 1704, 3 March, 1705, 2 June, 1705, 28 January, 1707, and 24 March, 1709, and that Thurmond played Othello on 9 October, 1708, ‘for the entertainment of his excellency Don Joseph Dias, Ambassador from the Emperour of Morocco, lately arriv’d’. The delightfully named Mrs Bracegirdle played Desdemona. See *The London Stage, 1660-1800*, part 2, ed. Emmet L. Avery (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1960), p. 178.

<sup>9</sup> ‘*Othello*’: a contextual history, p. 112. Julie Hankey talks about ‘the small snatches of information about the acting that have come down to us’ being ‘not especially juicy’ (*Plays in Performance*, p. 24).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>11</sup> I should note that this was a quiet time for Shakespeare in performance *per se*. Gary Taylor reminds us, ‘from 1682 to 1694 London had only one theatre and one company of actors’ (*Reinventing Shakespeare*, p. 54). The depression was to last until the advent of Colley Cibber’s *Othello* in 1710. The fact that *Othello* largely defied Restoration and eighteenth-century adaptation accounts for Michael Dobson’s near exclusion of the play from *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship, 1660-1769* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> Jean I. Marsden, *The Re-Imagined Text: Shakespeare, Adaptation, & Eighteenth-Century Literary Theory* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1995), p. 60.

<sup>13</sup> Curt A. Zimansky, ‘Introduction’, *The Critical Works of Thomas Rymer*, p. xxxii.

Given these latter ideological stipulations, we should not be surprised at Rymer's partisanship. The surprise lies in the extent to which Rymer – as *agent provocateur* – will go to show us that with this play, Shakespeare was out to 'delude our senses, disorder our thoughts, addle our brain, pervert our affections, hair our imaginations, corrupt our appetite, and fill our head with vanity, confusion'.<sup>14</sup> Not least of Shakespeare's infractions was to have created a black general of a white, European army, 'a note of pre-eminence which neither History nor Heraldry can allow him'. Rymer's moral outrage at the neglect of Aristotle's unsung unity of colour had both familial and political applications. In arguing that *Othello* 'may be a caution to all Maidens of Quality how, without their parents consent, they run away with *Blackamoors*',<sup>15</sup> the critic might also successfully incite the pamphleteers who fostered 'the running political debate of those years of frequent elections, with the morality of the theatres and of public life at issue'.<sup>16</sup>

To position himself, Rymer had returned to Shakespeare's source, in the same way that all sources were trawled endlessly to prove a point. The imperative is clear: *Di non si accompagnare con uomo, cui la natura & il cielo, & il modo della vita, disgiunge da noi*. The injunction – not to circulate amongst men whose natures, gods, and ways of life are distinct from us and ours – cites the inherent chariness towards negritude that two millennia of fiction had come, at the dawn of the eighteenth century, to factualise.<sup>17</sup>

As Rymer had been affronted by Shakespeare,<sup>18</sup> so Charles Gildon had been by Rymer. In his original *Reflections on Mr Rymer's Short View of Tragedy* of 1694, Gildon, attended by the ghost of Sir Thomas Browne,<sup>19</sup> protested Rymer's solipsistic rant: 'tis such a vulgar Error, so criminal a fondness of our Selves, to allow nothing of Humanity to any but our own Acquaintance of the fairer hew... Nature and Custom have not put any such unpassable bar betwixt Creatures

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<sup>14</sup> *A Short View of Tragedy*, pp. 131-2.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>16</sup> Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare*, p. 73.

<sup>17</sup> Giraldi Cinthio, *Gli Hecatommithi* (1565). My translation.

<sup>18</sup> Brian Vickers thinks that Rymer took *Othello* 'almost as a personal insult.' See *Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage*, vol. 2, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Browne's *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* – 'Vulgar Errors' – of 1646 questioned both biblical and pseudo-scientific creation theories of black skin. More compellingly, Browne's emphasis is upon reflectivity, upon a sustainable critique of whiteness as a means of revealing blackness.

of the same kind because of different colors', he complained, in laudably humanitarian terms.<sup>20</sup> Yet Bridget Orr reminds us, critically, that Gildon's protestation was undermined by the fact that 'dramatic practice altered to emphasize ethnic difference in cruder and more contemptuous terms'.<sup>21</sup>

In 1710, Gildon performed a 180-degree turn. His humanity waned as he reiterated Rymer's disdain: 'Nature – or what is all in one in this Case, Custom – having put such a bar as so opposite a Colour it takes away our Pity from her, and only raises our indignation against him'.<sup>22</sup> The seventeen-year time difference between Rymer's reason and Gildon's ultimate concurrence goes some way towards exposing the philosophical debates that underpinned enlightened social discourse and encroached upon theatrical discourse: that animalculism cede to empiricism, that a 'black' Othello simply did not compute, and that what makes us physically similar lies in nature but that which differentiates us from then on in lies in the exogenetics of social, cultural, religious and political influence.<sup>23</sup>

Where Virginia Mason Vaughan argues that despite 'Rymer's reaction to his colour, [Othello's] blackness was not necessarily a stumbling block to audience sympathy',<sup>24</sup> Gildon's about-face allows for the fact that such sympathy was up for grabs, ever dependent on the controlling discourses that surrounded blackness, within which Rymer and Gildon took their places. Their exchange suitably evidences the burden that contemporary philosophies and pseudo-sciences placed upon the status of black skin, which reduced the African to something of a conceptual rag-doll, to be snatched and snatched again from the surest of grasps. For the next century, Othello was to wear his mind on his sleeve as the rationality of Africans was held up, as t'were, to nurture.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> 'Some reflections on Mr. Rymer's *Short View of Tragedy* and an Attempt at a Vindication of *Shakespeare*, in an Essay directed to *John Dryden Esq.*', from Gildon's *Miscellaneous Letters and Essays on Several Subjects in Prose and Verse* [1694], in *Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage*, vol. 2, pp. 73-4.

<sup>21</sup> *Empire on the English Stage, 1660-1714* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 274.

<sup>22</sup> 'Remarks on the Plays of Shakespeare, prefixed to The Works of Mr. William Shakespeare. Volume the Seventh (1710)', in *Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage*, vol. 2, pp. 259-60.

<sup>23</sup> For a further discussion of these specific areas, see Srinivas Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688-1804* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>24</sup> 'Othello': a contextual history, p. 96.

<sup>25</sup> To speak of progress as if a teleological given is to ignore the potential of historiography to regenerate the less worthy facets of human nature. Homi Bhabha makes a similar observation: '[t]he

It was for the encyclopaedists of both new and old worlds to set down the pegs of canonised blackness. The welter of information about negritude observed came to relate exclusively to those people who inhabited the 'Torrid Zone';<sup>26</sup> so different was their physical appearance that the entry supposes them to 'constitute a new species of mankind'. 'But the ugliness remains', and the inhabitants stay 'wicked' even as their skin lightens the further away their provenance from the equator.<sup>27</sup> The first American edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1798) stated that the black figure was characterised by 'ugliness, and irregularity of shape', with 'large buttocks, which give the back the shape of the saddle'. These physical peculiarities hold not a patch on the accompanying diatribe: 'Vices the most notorious seem to be the portion of this unhappy race: idleness, treachery, revenge, cruelty, impudence...lying, profanity, debauchery, nastiness, and intemperance, are said to have...silenced the reproofs of conscience, and are an awful example of the corruption of man when left to himself'.<sup>28</sup> The need to categorise led to the precision contained within a racialised vocabulary. The more tutored the scientific discourse, the greater the act of suppression, as with the above authority, wherein both options for betterment, either natural or conscionable, are smothered.

Grand systematisers had at their temporal helm Carl von Linné ('Linneaus'), whose ground-breaking treatise divided *Homo Sapiens* into five groupings, each premised on physical difference. The aesthetic attributes of whiteness were played

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struggle against colonial oppression not only changes the direction of Western history, but challenges its historicist idea of time as a progressive, ordered whole'. See *The Location of Culture*, p. 41.

<sup>26</sup> In eighteenth-century climatological thought the Torrid Zone (Equatorial, e.g. 'Africa') sat between the Frigid Zone (Polar) and the Temperate Zone (Europe). The terms were later clarified by Hegel. The heat of the Torrid Zone either enraged the inhabitants or sent them to sleep (opinion is divided). Either way, slavery seemed to offer the cure. In his *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* [1808-11], Schlegel makes the following observation: 'We recognise in Othello the wild nature of that glowing zone which generates the most ravenous beasts of prey and the most deadly poisons, tamed only in appearance by the desire of fame, by foreign laws of honour, and by the nobler and milder manners'. See *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, ed. Jonathan Bate (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. 479.

<sup>27</sup> Diderot, Denis and d'Alembert, Jean Le Rond. *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonne des sciences, des arts, et des métiers* [1751-52] (Geneva: J.L. Pellet, 1778-1779). Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) merely states that a 'Negro' is 'A Blackmoore', and cites Sir Thomas Browne's enquiry for authority ('Negroes transplanted into cold and flegmatic habitations continue their hue in themselves and their generations').

<sup>28</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, American edition of 1798.

out against its opposite with the inevitable disapprobations closely intertwined.<sup>29</sup> Linnaeus's proto-classifications became the shady bedrock of enlightened inquisitions into blackness, each of which was attended by varying degrees of moral contamination. The Scottish philosopher David Hume was one content to foreground the white, ideologic convictions about black skin, just as David Garrick was collecting corks: 'I am apt to suspect the negroes...to be naturally inferior to whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action of speculation... There are negro slaves dispersed all over Europe, of whom none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity, though low people without education will start up amongst us and distinguish themselves in every profession'.<sup>30</sup>

As a direct result of the institution of slavery, the numbers of blacks in Britain increased dramatically over the course of the eighteenth century, during which 'ethnocentric generalizations were to be inextricably interwoven with notions of the cultural, mental, and spiritual inferiority of the African, serving to alleviate the English conscience about enslavement'.<sup>31</sup> Until the closing decades of the century, the black population 'consisted mainly of servants and former servants, musicians and seamen'; thereafter, a large influx of *post-bellum* black loyalist soldiers came to settle in the country 'for their promise of freedom and compensation'.<sup>32</sup> Hand in hand with this consistent bolstering of black communities arose 'a pitiless racism against black people',<sup>33</sup> within which systemics 'humanitarianism lost to commerce

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<sup>29</sup> The European is 'fair, sanguine, brawny' with 'yellow, brown' hair, and 'blue eyes' while at the same time 'gentle, acute, [and] inventive', civilized, and 'governed by laws'. The non-geographic 'Black' has 'frizzled' hair, 'tumid' lips, is 'crafty, indolent, [and] negligent' and 'governed by caprice'. See *A General System of Nature* (London: Lackington, Allen and Co., 1806), in *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader*, ed. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997), p. 13.

<sup>30</sup> 'Of National Characteristics' [1748], in *Selected Essays*, eds. Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 360, fn. Immanuel Kant evidences the inquisition's continued reliance on earlier sources: 'The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling. Mr Hume challenges anyone to cite a single example in which a Negro has shown talents... So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color'. See *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* [1764], in *Race and the Enlightenment*, ed. Eke, p. 55.

<sup>31</sup> Norma Myers, *Reconstructing the Black Past: Blacks in Britain, 1780-1830* (London, Portland, Or.: Frank Cass, 1996), p. 40.

<sup>32</sup> Gretchen Gerzina, *Black England: Life before Emancipation* (London: John Murray, 1995), p. 136.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 179-80.

under the guise of philanthropy'.<sup>34</sup> The nautical triangles of the slave trade came to breed a more formalised sense of racism which, as Peter Fryer reminds us, is 'systematic and internally consistent. In time it acquires a pseudo-scientific veneer that glosses over its irrationalities and enables it to claim intellectual respectability. And it is transmitted largely through the printed word'.<sup>35</sup>

What of Othello – who only exists through the printed word – amid Hume's half-rare conceptions of character? David Garrick's physically slight Moor took to the London stage in 1745, a mishandled commitment which saw him appear only three times in the role and hence, 'the play was passed by for ten years at Garrick's theatre'.<sup>36</sup> He was not, it seems, 'London's idea of Othello'.<sup>37</sup> Neither was his rival, James Quin, who, for twenty-five years at Lincoln's Inn Fields, had struggled through an era in which 'tragic acting fell into a decline'.<sup>38</sup> Quin's articulation had followed suit; his performance was somehow marred by munched lines delivered with 'a flat, slow, articulate, blanc, sullen, equal outspread of the voice',<sup>39</sup> which sounds like death for Othello long before lights out. Unlike Garrick, Quin was a big man, and made a 'large, heavy, slow-moving... big, black Moor'.<sup>40</sup> His taste was for the grand, declamatory style of Restoration theatre, where Garrick instead had genuine psychological intensity.

For his performances, Quin effectively whited-up his invisible body, dressing as a British officer in a white uniform and white gloves, which would catch the powder that fell from the white wig atop his blackened head. The accentuation of Quin's blackness was extreme, the visual opposition binarial. Although the sensual peeling away of the gloves to reveal his black hands became 'a famous piece of business',<sup>41</sup> these very accentuations contributed to his comedic, chequered

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London and Sydney: Pluto Press, 1984), p. 134.

<sup>36</sup> George Odell, *Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving*, 2 vols. (London: Constable, 1963), i. 339.

<sup>37</sup> Carola Oman, *David Garrick* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1958), p. 75.

<sup>38</sup> Julie Hankey, *Plays in Performance*, p. 34.

<sup>39</sup> So thought the all-round man of theatre, Aaron Hill. See *The Works of the late Aaron Hill, Esq.*, 4 vols. (London, 1753), ii. 157.

<sup>40</sup> Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of Othello: The Search for the Identity of Othello, Iago, and Desdemona by Three Centuries of Actors and Critics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University Of California Press, 1961), p. 39.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

appearance; less Moor, more 'Magpye', at least according to Francis Gentleman, writing in 1770.<sup>42</sup> Quin, it seems, had been keen to promote an Anglicised characterisation, and although his Moor was 'well-suited to restrained heroics', it was 'not enough for Othello'.<sup>43</sup>

Garrick at least had the opportunity for personal research. We know he had a number of black friends in London with whom he might discuss viable characterisations.<sup>44</sup> We also know what Garrick thought of the theatrical potential of a Moor's blackness:

the Abbé Morellet asked Garrick why Othello was created black... His answer was that Shakespeare had shown us white men jealous in other pieces, but that their jealousy had limits, and was not so terrible; that in the part of Othello he had wished to paint that passion in all its violence, and that is why he chose an African in whose veins circulated fire instead of blood and whose true or imaginary character could excuse all boldness of expression and all exaggerations of passion.<sup>45</sup>

What is 'true' to Africa and the African is exactly the 'imaginary' given life by Garrick. To him, Shakespeare had not written of jealousy, but of African jealousy.

But not only was Garrick an overly passionate Othello, he was clumsily orientalist and too short, too readily a reminder of Hogarth's engraving, *The Harlot's Progress*, which featured a black page-boy (a 'Pompey') as a contesting symbol both of social wherewithal and of 'white duplicity', attesting to the 'infidelity, crudeness and vanity of the people who owned them'.<sup>46</sup> At Garrick's resplendent entry on his opening night, black of face, dressed in a Venetian General's scarlet tunic and wearing 'an impressive turban',<sup>47</sup> Quin, in the audience and exercising clear *sotto voce*, was heard to exclaim, 'Othello!...Psha! no such thing! There was a little black boy, like Pompey attending with a tea-kettle, fretting

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<sup>42</sup> *The Dramatic Censor* (London, 1770), pp. 151-2.

<sup>43</sup> Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of Othello*, p. 39.

<sup>44</sup> For comments on and anecdotes of these friendships, see Gretchen Gerzina, *Black England*, pp. 36-7. A Thomas Gainsborough portrait of Garrick's African acquaintance Ignatius Sancho, the slave cum shop-keeper cum letter-writer, remains today at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. Apparently the portrait took only 1 hour 40 minutes to complete.

<sup>45</sup> F.A. Hedgecock, *A Cosmopolitan Actor: David Garrick and his French Friends* (London: P. Stanley, 1912), footnote on p. 341.

<sup>46</sup> Gretchen Gerzina, *Black England: Life before Emancipation* (London: John Murray, 1995), p. 17.

<sup>47</sup> Oman, *David Garrick*, p. 75.

and fuming about the stage; but I saw no Othello!’<sup>48</sup> Of Garrick’s attire, Margaret Barton notes that ‘it could not have been the only reason for his failure; the audience always laughed at that point of the play, for every Othello played by a white man with a blackened face looked, and still looks, to some extent incongruous’.<sup>49</sup>

Quin’s outburst should also be seen in the light of his own failure to project a convincing outsider. The sniping speaks of a jealousy between the two that neither could successfully harness under blackface. Marvin Rosenberg sees Garrick’s weakness arising from his choice fully to oppose Quin’s representation, but in ‘escaping the stuffed hero, he went too far and shattered the image of the Moor in fragmentary excitements’. In distancing himself from his rival, Garrick distanced himself from any sense of tragic deportment; in sensing ‘the need to project through the Moor a violent – even horrid – inner agony that could not be contained in the customary envelope of a proper hero’,<sup>50</sup> Garrick underestimated his bemusing physical presence. That envelope, the pasted outer-casing of cork burnt in alcohol, ‘was a particularly serious handicap’ to Garrick, ‘who depended on facial expression for nearly all his best effects’.<sup>51</sup>

Garrick’s need to exaggerate would have brought attention to his size; his way of creating the magnitude of Othello was to flap his arms in bursts of anguish: ‘Anger, horror, despair, physical suffering and madness he could simulate with genius, but when the theme turned on jealousy or any other form of sexual emotion, his insincerity betrayed itself in the over-violence of his gestures’.<sup>52</sup> His problem was one of over-intensification which led him to over-project; Quin’s was one of timorousness. The small man had tried to make himself bigger, the big man had tried to disappear into himself. Leigh Woods likewise refers to ‘the problem of [Garrick’s] size’ and ‘a particularly unflattering costume’.<sup>53</sup> Perhaps Garrick too

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 75. Errol Hill thought Quin ‘looked ridiculous’. See *Shakespeare in Sable: A History of Black Shakespearean Actors*, p. 8.

<sup>49</sup> *Garrick* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), p. 66.

<sup>50</sup> *The Masks of Othello*, p. 41.

<sup>51</sup> Margaret Barton, *Garrick*, p. 66. Another victim of cross-signification is revealed.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>53</sup> *Garrick Claims the Stage: Acting as Social Emblem in Eighteenth-Century England* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1984), p. 82.

looked farcical; or the confused formality of his costume – European chivalry surmounted by Oriental topiary – simply failed to differentiate him.<sup>54</sup>

Garrick's lack of perceived physicality presupposes a reachable paradigm for Othello: that a black(ed) warrior must be of a certain bulk so as to impose himself on the role. Yet Edmund Kean was a wiry 5 feet 6 inches tall, and Quin, but for his tactical diminuendo, would seem entirely appropriate under these conditions. Quin's paroxysm attests to the ease with which one difference can come to connote every difference and touches upon Gerzen's remark that 'even while black people in general and black slaves in particular fell into certain proscribed types of representation... one of the common reactions to their plight was an ironic and unabashed bathos'.<sup>55</sup> That Garrick should fail in part due to his size recalls Homi Bhabha's demand for identification; the lack of physicality begs the presence of an overt physicality, in keeping with the warrior's mythical frame.

A fan of Garrick, Charlotte Lennox, outlined the complexities of 'character' within critical awarenesses of the play: 'The Virtues of *Shakespeare's Moor* are no less characteristic than the Vices of Cinthio's; they are the wild Growth of an uncultivated Mind, barbarous and rude as the Clime he is born in'.<sup>56</sup> The suggestion of course is that untutored virtue is useless. Her ideas are a condensation of Locke's and Hume's anti-rational aversions and the *carte blanche* capabilities of the untainted yet educable African. Of Spranger Barry's Moor, whom Lennox saw at Covent Garden on 7 March, 1757, she was to write that 'the extravagance of all his Ideas, and of the Emotions attendant on them, is perfectly characteristic... The whole is vented with the impetuous ferocity natural to one of Othello's Complexion, still improved with the wildest Harmony of voice'.<sup>57</sup> William Cooke spoke of the same vocal proportion. More important was the overall positive impression that Barry made as the Stranger, for

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<sup>54</sup> Julie Hankey writes that 'in no other part, for example, does it seem to have mattered so much that Garrick was neither tall, nobly handsome, nor possessed of a musical voice' (*Plays in Performance*, p. 36).

<sup>55</sup> *Black England*, p. 11.

<sup>56</sup> *Shakespear Illustrated: or the Novels and Histories, On which the Plays of Shakespear are Founded*, 2 vols., in *Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage*, vol. 4, p. 121.

<sup>57</sup> *From the London Chronicle: or Universal Evening Post, 1757*, in *Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage*, vol. 4, pp. 285-6.

the harmony of his voice and the manly beauty of his person, spoke him alike the hero and the lover, and those who before doubted of the part's consistency on forming a mutual passion between such characters as the black Othello and the fair Desdemona, were now convinced of his propriety. They saw from Barry's predominant and fascinating manner, that mere colour could not be a barrier to affection.<sup>58</sup>

Of Spranger Barry's physiognomics, Virginia Mason Vaughan records one anonymous critic's excitement that one 'could observe the muscles stiffening, the veins distending, and the red blood boiling through his dark skin – a mighty flood of passion accumulating for several minutes – and at length, bearing down its barriers and sweeping onward in thunder'.<sup>59</sup> This fetishistic referencing of Othello's facial *minutiae* is unique among Shakespeare's tragic heroes. For those who could discern the actor's emotional appropriations, the key to understanding the African's irrationality was contained directly beneath the temporary face-mask.

What we learn from Lennox and Cooke is entirely germane to critical fashion at this time: Othello's colour pre-conditions all response, but the Moor might overcome natural aversions by raising himself in accordance with the monitored standards of western aesthetic harmony. What happened, then, when Othello's face changed colour, when an absence of blackness was made overt by its substitution? Unlike the totalising codings of the Renaissance, blackness-by-degree was a feature of nineteenth-century theatrical discourse, and came to impinge upon Edmund Kean's choice to adopt socially proximate flesh tones early in the century. The tenor of Enlightenment criticism had worked towards Othello as a slave to passion, a prisoner of the dreaded irrational. Less attentive to colour than cause, critics such as Samuel Foote had been at pains to explain the seeming paradox of nobility coexisting with savagery: 'Sure never has there been a Character more misunderstood both by Audience and Actor than this before us, to mistake the most tender-hearted, compassionate, humane man for a cruel, bloody and obdurate

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<sup>58</sup> *Memoirs of Charles Macklin: Comedian* (London: J. Asperne, 1806), p. 155.

<sup>59</sup> 'Othello': *a contextual history*, p. 120.

savage'.<sup>60</sup> Towards the close of the eighteenth century, Shakespeare's part in this error stimulated an Anglicisation of the Moor.

The myth of the Noble Savage, created in its English paradigm in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* of 1688, came to be re-plumed by Romanticism's raptures of organic equality, and so 'Africa and her indigenous population were to become the objects of wild, romantic imagination... Through poetry, the Negro is depicted as an object for socialization and education, and this idyllic image persisted well into the nineteenth century'.<sup>61</sup> To this end, the Noble Savage was a prophet from the past.<sup>62</sup> The premise of a worthy prelapsarian man lent to creativity a buffer against which the vices of civilisation could be squeezed. As Thomas Cartelli observes, 'Oroonoko, like Othello, is meant to represent the best of his kind, the furthest possible development of the Europeanized (hence, civil) African'.<sup>63</sup>

What we glean here is that in a century-and-a-half of full British participation in slavery, blackness had necessarily become an institutionalised signifier, now more bound than ever to a recognition of servitude and subjugation. From this, we also see that if Othello was to continue to speak to the virtuous English, then something had to give; since his other means of communication were largely circumscribed, Othello needed, somehow, to retain recognisable, alluring *visual* traits. The best way to achieve this was to remind the audience that the actor playing him was an Englishman, and that such reassuring meta-theatricality should shine through Othello's Moorish integument.

Edmund Kean's methodology necessitated a lightening of Othello's face-mask; he went 'tawny', obtrusively dividing Othello from his blackness, playing

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<sup>60</sup> *A Treatise on the Passions, So far as they regard the Stage; With a critical Enquiry into the Theatrical Merit of Mr. Garrick, Mr. Quin, and Mr. Barry* (1747), in *Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage*, vol. 3, p. 219.

<sup>61</sup> Hoxie Neale Fairchild, *The Noble Savage: A Study in Romantic Naturalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1928), p. 49. Behn's protagonist speaks both French and English with fluency: he is already a highly unusual African. He also looks like any Englishman; indeed, writes Behn, 'bating his colour, there could be nothing in nature more beautiful, agreeable and handsome'. See *Oroonoko, or The Royal Slave: A True History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), pp. 80-1. The novel had earlier been adapted with considerable success for the London stage by Thomas Southerne in 1695.

<sup>62</sup> John Gillies reads Othello's characterisation in alliance with Oroonoko, and through the myth of Tereus, wherefrom he seeks the 'pollutiveness' of the other. See *Shakespeare and the geography of difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 25-30.

<sup>63</sup> *Repositioning Shakespeare: National Formations, Postcolonial Appropriations* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 130.

'light-skinned rather than...dark skinned sub-Saharan African because he believed that a paler skin would enhance the character's nobility'.<sup>64</sup> In a telling interjection, Ben Okri notes the potential hereby to disempower blackness: 'When a black man is portrayed as noble in the West it usually means that he is neutralized. When white people speak so highly of a black man's nobility they are usually referring to his impotence'.<sup>65</sup> If we recall that blacking up obscured audience visibility, it is quite possible to argue for a less political motivation.<sup>66</sup> In any case, what we might call the Bronze age of Othello had commenced.<sup>67</sup>

We can see in Kean's mask an implicit concurrence with the revulsion at Shakespeare's choice felt by critics of the day, themselves propelling Rymer into the nineteenth century. Charles Lamb, for example, argued for the impropriety of the miscegenation on show: 'I appeal to every one who has seen *Othello* played, whether he did not, on the contrary, sink Othello's mind in his colour; whether he did not find something extremely revolting in the courtship and wedded caresses of Othello and Desdemona; and whether the actual sight of the thing did not overweigh all that beautiful compromise which we make in reading'.<sup>68</sup> Lamb's close acquaintance, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, similarly struggled to fathom how the man of genius could have so usurped his own talent in making 'a barbarous negro plead royal birth, – at a time, too, when negroes were not known except as slaves'.<sup>69</sup> Douglas Lorimer tells us that '[n]ineteenth-century English spokesmen incorporated all black men into the single category of the "Negro". They made no precise distinctions between differing populations in Africa, or between Africans and Afro-

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<sup>64</sup> Sujata Iyengar, 'White Faces, Blackface: the Production of "Race" in *Othello*', in *Othello: New Critical Essays*, ed. Philip C. Kolin (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), p. 107.

<sup>65</sup> Ben Okri, 'Leaping out of Shakespeare's Terror: Five Meditations on *Othello*', in *A Way of Being Free*, p. 77.

<sup>66</sup> Another helpful discussion of tawny and black diversities is provided by Charles B. Lower. See 'Othello as Black on Southern Stages, Then and Now', in *Shakespeare in the South: Essays in Performance*, ed. Philip C. Kolin (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1983), pp. 199-228.

<sup>67</sup> 'The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle' (Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 18).

<sup>68</sup> *On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, considered with reference to their fitness for stage representation* (1811), in *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, p. 124.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 482. Hartley Coleridge observed that 'Mr. C. ridiculed the idea of making Othello a negro, he was a gallant Moor, of royal blood, combining a high sense of Spanish and Italian feeling, and whose noble nature was wrought on'. From 'Lectures on the Characteristics of Shakespeare' (1813), ed. H.N. Coleridge, cited in *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, p. 138.

Americans'.<sup>70</sup> It is important to remember that Othello was not regarded as a 'Negro' but as a noble Moor; which was enough to confound A. W. Von Schlegel: 'What a fortunate mistake that the Moor (under which name in the original novel, a baptized Saracen of the Northern coast of Africa was unquestionably meant), has been made by Shakspeare in every respect a negro!'<sup>71</sup>

Coleridge came to answer his own question: 'Othello must not be conceived as a negro, but a high and chivalrous Moorish chief'.<sup>72</sup> He found Shakespeare's choice of subject offensive to the English nature: 'yet as we are constituted... it would be something monstrous to conceive this beautiful Venetian girl falling in love with a veritable negro. It would argue a disproportionateness, a want of balance, in Desdemona, which Shakespeare does not appear in the least to have contemplated'.<sup>73</sup> For his pains, Coleridge received a ridiculing from Bradley a century later,<sup>74</sup> yet his outrage falls into line with what he would have read in his Hegel, who summarily dismissed any form of social relationship with the African: 'All our observations of African man show him as living in a state of savagery and barbarism, and he remains in this state to the present day. The Negro is an example of animal man in all his savagery and lawlessness, and if we wish to understand him, we must put aside all our European attitudes'.<sup>75</sup>

This was the world of thought into which Edmund Kean's Moor stepped in 1814. Kean, who gave 'the greatest English interpretation of the nineteenth century',<sup>76</sup> had, for nearly two decades, embodied the 'ideal of the period as expounded by the romantic critics': that of inwardness and of 'a new preoccupation

<sup>70</sup> *Colour, Class and the Victorians*, p. 11.

<sup>71</sup> *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* (1808-11), in *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, p. 479.

<sup>72</sup> '24 June 1827', in *The Table Talk and Omniana* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1917), p. 195.

<sup>73</sup> *Coleridge's Essays & Lectures on Shakespeare & some other old Poets and Dramatists* (London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1907), pp. 170-1.

<sup>74</sup> 'Could any argument be more self-destructive?' See Bradley's first lecture on *Othello* in *Shakespearean Tragedy* [1904] (London: Macmillan, 1966), p. 164. Section three contains a compelling *laissez-faire* argument for those who would wish to exploit the constructed differentials of blackamoors, tawnymoors, and whitmoors.

<sup>75</sup> 'Geographic Basis of World History', in *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, ed. Johannes Hoffmeister (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 177. Where Hegel was right is in his final clause. To Hegel, the shelving of European attitudes was not possible: one cannot critique via any other means. But read the clause again, and Hegel offers up the recipe for the critique of Orientalism, *avant la lettre*.

<sup>76</sup> Hankey, *Plays in Performance*, p. 56.

with Othello's soul, rather than with his passions',<sup>77</sup> a taste of which accompanies Leigh Hunt's critical paean to Kean's 'masterpiece of the living stage':

In the previous composure of its dignity, in its soldier-like repression of common impulse, in the deep agitation of its first jealousy, in the low-voiced and faltering affection of occasional ease, in the burst of intolerable anguish, in the consciousness of its character, in the consequent melancholy farewell to its past joys and greatness, in the desperate savageness of its revenge, in its half-exhausted reception of the real truth, and lastly, in the final resumption of a kind of moral attitude and dignity, at the moment when it uses that fine deliberate artifice and sheathes the dagger in its breast.<sup>78</sup>

Hazlitt thought Kean's Moor 'the highest effort of genius on the stage', although the critic raised 'some technical objections': 'Othello was tall; but that is nothing: he was black; but that is nothing. But he was not fierce, and that is everything'.<sup>79</sup> Seventy years after Garrick, it is no longer the lack of physical presence that stunts success. The altered dramatic paradigm above all demanded truculence, the absence of which disappointed Hazlitt (who still saw no contradiction in an Othello who lacks everything yet who appropriates his role with insurmountable perfection).<sup>80</sup>

Two of Kean's prompt books at the Folger Library highlight the actor's commitment to a more socially proximate revelation of the character. He was costumed in 'A green, velvet fly, scarlet vest, and white muslin trowsers, yellow morocco boots, copper-coloured corset and pantaloons, cestus, rich turban, and sarcenet cloth robe'.<sup>81</sup> He also, like many of his predecessors and contemporaries, yielded to sensibility and cut lines 1.3.162-9, 'Wherein of antres vast...whose heads

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>78</sup> From *The Examiner*, 4 October, 1818, reprinted in *Leigh Hunt's Dramatic Criticism 1801-1831*, ed. L.H. and C.W. Houtchens (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), pp. 201-2.

<sup>79</sup> Letter to *The Examiner*, 7 January, 1816. Cited in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P.P. Howe, 21 vols. (London and Toronto: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1930), v. 271.

<sup>80</sup> Kean's Othello, unlike Garrick's, continues to inspire the encomiastic, being 'the image of Othello that Garrick had dreamed of... an explosion of violence, terror, love, pity. He was a great emotional instrument. Audiences trembled at his fury; Byron wept at his sobs. His Moor seemed to be the flower of romanticism in the theater, questing for a passion beyond known passion'. See Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of Othello*, p. 61.

<sup>81</sup> *Oth.* 17. Prompt Book. A: Edmund Kean. 1831. The Folger Library, for whose grant-in-aid and hospitality I am very grateful, owns fifty-four prompt books of the play, from the Smock Alley books of the 1670s to an unattributed 1962 production. While for the most part information gleaned relates to blocking, one or two books yielded actors' comments on the playing of the role.

/(Do grow) beneath their shoulders'. The consequence is to deny Othello greater exoticisation than is already present and makes it much harder to justify the Duke's 'I think this tale would win my daughter too' (1.3.197). To look at Kean's 1818 promptbook, this latter line is cut, as is the final restorative speech, the play ending on Othello's self-smiting and the word 'Thus!'<sup>82</sup> Indicative, as these annotations are, of a diluted form of blackness on Kean's stage, we find, in Ira Aldridge, 'one of the finest Shakespearean interpreters of all time',<sup>83</sup> Edmund Kean's natural foil.

In 1824, this seventeen-year old black American boy had come to debunk the colonisers' suppositions that had historically circulated around 'their' Moor. In the space of nine years, Ira Aldridge was to become the observed of all Hegel's observers, one who would test the beliefs of key, white thinkers of the Romantic period. Aldridge made his debut as Southerne's *Oroonoko* in 1825. He first played Othello to an English audience at the Theatre Royal, Brighton on 17 December, 1825. He was named 'The African Roscius', which sobriquet itself introduces the exotic into the Roscii club,<sup>84</sup> while allowing for the fact that parity, in every sense, is possible. Aldridge was a precocious Roscius indeed. He replaced the terminally-ill Kean at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, on 10 and 12 April, 1833, just four months before Parliament banished slavery.<sup>85</sup> Yet to concede success to Aldridge would have been to controvert, notionally, the whole basis of slavery: that the African was intellectually stymied. In perfect tandem with the circulating *principia* of slavery, the early reviews are of Ira Aldridge, not of Othello at all:

Looking to his birth, parentage and education, nothing short of inspiration could possibly make him a fit delineator of Shakespeare's Othello... In the name of common sense, we enter our protest against a repetition of this outrage. In the name of propriety and decency, we protest against an

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<sup>82</sup> *Oth.* 18. Prompt Book. A: Edmund Kean. London. Drury Lane c. 1818. B: G.C. Carr, Henry Irving. This final word, effectively an open-ended stage direction, will stimulate multiple interpretations by Othellos on film.

<sup>83</sup> Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable*, p. 17.

<sup>84</sup> Alongside Quintus Roscius Gallus (c.120-62 BC), the Roman slave turned favourite comedy actor come, among others, David 'Roscius' Garrick, and Sam Cowell – 'The Young American Roscius' – who toured the USA performing Shakespeare contemporarily to Aldridge in London. The memoir of John Downes, William D'Avenant's prompter, was entitled *Roscius Anglicanus, or an Historical Review of the Stage from 1660 – 1706*.

<sup>85</sup> Slavery was abolished 25 March, 1808, although full emancipation did not take place until *The Slavery Abolition Act* was passed by the British Parliament on 24 August, 1833, coming into law on 1 August, 1834.

interesting and lady-like girl like Ellen Terry being subjected by the manager of a theatre to the indignity of being pawed about by Mr. Henry Wallack's black servant.<sup>86</sup>

Never was belief suspended so ineffectually. The article recalls and re-circulates the same precepts of blackness that Rymer and Gildon used to damn Shakespeare a century-and-a-half back in time: that the African's nature and custom were incommensurate to Shakespeare's creation, and that ladies of class might be tempted towards dalliance, a danger to social proportion. But now the target was a living African-American who seemed 'not the barbarian African he was rather expected to be',<sup>87</sup> and who was expected to fulfil the nobility of the Moor. Aldridge was effectively hounded from the stage, subsequently excluded from Drury Lane, and thereafter forced to tour the provinces where he constantly sought to challenge the establishment: '[n]ot only was the personal conflict of his stage character revealed in his performance but, wherever appropriate, the social implications of dramas involving racial difference were emphasised'.<sup>88</sup>

Fifteen years' peregrination softened the critical stance towards the black American. His on-going and enforced detachment from the London stage had left his performances at the behest of more rounded, provincial critics, to whom 'the economic and sexual threat of the "black man" was less potent'.<sup>89</sup> His Othello was finally worthy of attention:

There is a repose, a dignity, and a natural gravity and earnestness about Mr Aldridge's personification of the dusky Moor that are particularly impressive. He is very fine in the part, and the natural hue of his skin helps to make the illusion perfect... His declamation has all the dignity, and his action all the grace, which belong to primitive races... There was something terribly touching in this display of physical strength, wrought up by mental agony.<sup>90</sup>

That physicality was noticed elsewhere: 'He is thoroughly natural, easy and

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<sup>86</sup> 'Unsigned', in *Athenaeum*, 13 April, 1833. Wallack was an esteemed English actor touring the United States in the early nineteenth century. Aldridge became Wallack's stage-hand in New York City and travelled originally to England in Wallack's service in 1824.

<sup>87</sup> Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of Othello*, p. 118.

<sup>88</sup> Errol Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable*, p. 20.

<sup>89</sup> Sujata Iyegnar, 'White Faces, Blackface: the Production of "Race" in *Othello*', in *Othello: New Critical Essays*, p. 109.

<sup>90</sup> *The Era*, 8 April, 1848.

sensible, albeit he has abundance of physique at his command when the exercise of it is required. In a word, he obviously knows what he is at, and there is as little of the “fustian” about him as there is in anybody on the stage’.<sup>91</sup>

These two sets of reviews, separated by a total of twenty-four years, create the boundaries of critical responses to Aldridge. What makes them useful to this enquiry is that they come from the established centre and that both, therefore, will more likely rely on the perceptual than the instinctual. The first, the excoriating response to Aldridge of the London press, overlooks performance altogether; the outrage is insurmountable and, like most appeals to common sense, shows us how uncommon sense really is. What we see, in a moment, is a Fanonian abandonment of solicitude, for colonialism ‘did not seek to be considered by the native as a gentle, loving mother who protects her child from a hostile environment, but rather as a mother who unceasingly restrains her fundamentally perverse offspring from managing to commit suicide and from giving free rein to its evil instincts’.<sup>92</sup> The 1833 press outburst against Aldridge comes to seem like the grudging of a failed Britannia; the genuine black body is beyond her control and certain, finally, of its own fate. The maternity which both embraces and spurns the Moor yielded a loathing and an outrage as much occasioned by Britannia’s failure to protect than by Aldridge’s success in spurning all protection. Joyce Green Macdonald notes this jarring precedent set by Aldridge, which gave rise to this acrimony: ‘As a black man playing the role of a black man, Aldridge forged a new link between signs and meanings. His performance undid Kean’s visual erasure of blackness as a locus of meaning in the play, and also challenged the relevance of previous centuries’ efforts by white actors to “act black”’.<sup>93</sup>

The second review, in a year of Europe-wide revolution, is revelatory. The idea of helping to make the illusion perfect is spot-on. Notwithstanding that the language chews a thistle in place of speaking what it feels, the proclamation of excellence is undoubted. What remains though is a sheer fascination with black

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<sup>91</sup> *The Era*, 26 April, 1857.

<sup>92</sup> *The Wretched of the Earth*, tr. Constance Farrington (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 169-70.

<sup>93</sup> Joyce Green Macdonald, ‘Acting black: “Othello”, “Othello” burlesques, and the performance of blackness’, in *Theatre Journal* 46 (1994): 232.

physicality and all its seeming transgressive potentialities: the first reviewer, offended by the 'pawing' African; the second, well for 'terribly touching' we can read, if we wish, 'terrifying'; and the third, from 1857, was compelled, once again, to call upon Aldridge's 'abundance of physique'. A contemporary insight into how Aldridge called upon the advantage of natural alterity comes from his last Desdemona, Dame Madge Kendal:

Mr. Ira Aldridge was a man who, being black, always picked out the fairest woman he could to play Desdemona with him, not because she was capable of acting but because she had a fair head. One of the great bits of 'business' he used to do was where in one of the scenes he had to say, 'Your hand, Desdemona.' He made a very great point of opening his hand and making you place yours in it; and the audience used to see the contrast.<sup>94</sup>

Julie Hankey argues that the death in 1833 of Edmund Kean was tantamount to 'the death of Othello himself, at least for a generation. The stage history of the play for the following forty years or so is one of continual disappointment in the main character, and a rising interest in Iago'.<sup>95</sup> But the soaring, passion-fuelled, internalised complexities of Kean's Moor had been forced to share the minds of critics with the graceful, 'natural' and unaffected Aldridge.

Kean's pyrotechnics aside, Aldridge will always be the first black to play Othello on the London stage. Because his Moor had crossed mirage-like social lines, approbative declarations were scarce indeed. Yet his potential legacy to the stage, even in his own time, did not evade all observers; his achievements are perhaps best qualified in the stifled yet victorious words of Theodor Fontaine who, mid-century, was to write that 'Ira Aldridge's performance seems not to have been without influence on the development of the characterisation of Othello that is now generally accepted'.<sup>96</sup> Not bad for a pawing black servant. Not bad at all.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>94</sup> Mrs. Kendal, *Dramatic Opinions* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1890), pp. 28-9.

<sup>95</sup> *Plays in Performance*, p. 92.

<sup>96</sup> *Shakespeare in the London Theatre, 1855-58*, ed. Russell Jackson (London: The Society for Theatre Research, 1999), p. 21. In *Shakespeare in Sable* (p. 19), Errol Hill argues for Stanislavski's debt to Aldridge's methodology.

<sup>97</sup> *The Weekly Times* of 5 December, 1852, reported that the King of Prussia presented Aldridge with 'the great gold medal... a distinction bestowed on persons of the first eminence in their professions'. As a mark of the award's prestige, the only other recipients until that time had been Alexander von Humboldt, and the composers Spontini and Liszt.

The revelation that was Aldridge increases its grip on history when we consider his associations with blackface minstrelsy in his native United States and with *Othello* burlesques in Britain, both of which fed the suppressive regimen which his appearance in the culturally credible Shakespeare had overcome. Joyce Green Macdonald picks up the nexus:

Aldridge's onstage presence was just as powerfully conditioned theatrically by the existing tradition of blackface and tawny Othellos and by the almost exactly contemporary growth of the minstrel show tradition in the United States... [whose] parodic exaggeration of black physicality, provided – just as did Dowling's *Othello Travestie* and later 'darkey dramas'... a means of rewriting what white Anglo-American cultures regarded as 'the more threatening, chaotic, and subversive aspects of the black body'.<sup>98</sup>

Ruth Cowig goes on to note that Aldridge appeared in Manchester in a 'musical melodrama' entitled *The Slave*. The spectacle of the black man parodying black men struck a chord with his reviewers, the one observing that Aldridge acted 'without having the slightest occasion for having the cosmetic assistance of burnt cork', while a colleague noted how he performed 'in a style so truly natural that one might take him for the character he represented'.<sup>99</sup> Among Aldridge's gifts was the ability to make his critics forget the entire, illusory premise of theatre. Indeed, the point of minstrelsy was avowedly opposed to such confusion; into the space between the blackened white actor and his parodic performance of blackness was poured the anxiety of a nation, through laughter, for sure, the better to distance the fear that black folk might just be the same as everyone else.

The fascination with which the dangerously miscegenous Othello held Victorian audiences ensured the play's entry into the disruptive pantheon of burlesques. While Aldridge was nightly ending Othello's occupation in Britain's provinces, Maurice Dowling was making a raucous comedian of the Moor in the big city. Audiences unseduced by a genuine black Othello could have their beliefs reinscribed by a trip to the burlesques, where a white man would lampoon the

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<sup>98</sup> 'Acting black: "Othello", "Othello" burlesques, and the performance of blackness': 234. For the writer's creative response to blackness, see MacDonald's "'The Force of Imagination": The Subject of Blackness in Shakespeare, Jonson, and Ravenscroft', in *Renaissance Papers* (1991): 53-74.

<sup>99</sup> Both are undated, anonymous reviews in *The Manchester Courier*, cited in Cowig's 'Ira Aldridge in Manchester', in *Theatre Research International* 11 (1986): 240.

specific racial alterity brought by a black man to the role. As William J. Maher has observed, 'The authors of the Othello burlesques recognized that the audience's fear about racial mixing had greater potential for comedy than the more complex problems inherent in portraying Othello's jealousy and Iago's obsession with vengeance'.<sup>100</sup>

Dowling's *Othello Travestie* was performed at the Liver Theatre, Liverpool, in March 1834, and at the Strand Theatre sometime in the same year.<sup>101</sup> The nature of the *Othello* burlesque was to parody two highly recognizable commodities, Shakespeare and the black body, the accent less on the mutability of the former than the essence of the latter: 'In exchange for the uncomfortable spectacle of blacks acting white, the audiences of minstrel shows or *Othello* "burlettas" would be offered the more reassuring spectacle of whites acting black, of reasserting a relation between observer and object which affirmed white authority over, and authorship of, narratives of racial difference'.<sup>102</sup> Subtlety was not a strong suit in the burlesque; then again it was not sought by writers and audience alike. The comedic allowed for the promulgation of sincere social concerns, while reproducing low-brow Shakespeare. Brabantio's response to the news of tuppings embodies the comic undermining of Shakespeare while simultaneously stigmatizing intercultural relationships: 'Surely I shall burst with sorrow / And be dead before tomorrow; / To think my daughter'd wed Othello; / A nasty, fusty, black old fellow!' (12).

The attractions of the play for this genre were manifest: '*Othello* was commonly viewed as an "antimiscegenation play" because, even though most audiences believed that such marriages were likely to end tragically, they also had an abiding fascination with and deep curiosity about such relationships'. This mono-dimensional view of the play necessitated radical minimalism: 'The typical scenes used in the blackface *Othellos* are Iago's declaration of his intention to ruin

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<sup>100</sup> William J. Maher, 'Ethiopian Skits and Sketches: Contents and Contexts of Blackface Minstrelsy, 1840-1890', in *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy*, eds. Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1996), p. 192.

<sup>101</sup> Maurice Dowling, 'Othello Travestie: An Operatic Burlesque Burletta in Two Acts' [1834], in *Nineteenth-Century Shakespeare Burlesques*, vol. 2, ed. Stanley Wells (London: Diploma Press, 1977), pp. 3-43.

<sup>102</sup> Joyce Green MacDonald, 'Acting black: "Othello", "Othello" burlesques, and the performance of blackness': 236.

Othello (1.1), Brabantio's pleas to the Duke and Senators (1.3), the handkerchief scene (3.4), and the murder of Desdemona (5.2).<sup>103</sup> In this way, *Othello Travestie*, for example, yields to both succinctness and racial spectacle, 'restag[ing] Shakespeare's love tragedy as a racial farce whose utter incongruity rests on a foundation of thwarted and perverted desire'.<sup>104</sup>

In Aldridge's native United States, in 1855, the first black minstrel troupe, the 'Mocking Bird Minstrels' had appeared in Philadelphia, giving immediate rise to numerous off-spring nationwide. Zeal alone was not enough to reschedule minstrelsy's subjected targets though, for although 'the "actors" were "real negroes", they were still expected to perform the acts and to portray the characters that white minstrelsy had established as the norm'.<sup>105</sup> This would involve the application of burnt cork, the appropriation of an accentuated southern dialect, and requisite physical and vocal self-denigration. The tenor was white supremacy, its means fulfilled by physical mimicry of black by black or black by white. Eric Lott observes that 'Although it arose from a white obsession with black (male) bodies which underlies white racial dread to our own day, it ruthlessly disavowed its fleshy investments through ridicule and racist lampoon'.<sup>106</sup> Both of these forms of racial denigration, the burlesque and minstrelsy, had massive popular appeal in Britain.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>103</sup> 'Ethiopian Skits and Sketches', pp. 189-92.

<sup>104</sup> Joyce Green MacDonald, 'Acting black: "Othello", "Othello" burlesques, and the performance of blackness': 242. Upon entering to put out the light, Othello sings a song called 'King of the Cannibal Islands' (39). Although Dowling had Othello strangle Desdemona, she comes back to life (accompanied by her ghost) in time to forgive Iago his sins. Conversely, the *Othello* performed by Griffin and Christy's Minstrels in 1870 closed the entertainment with Othello strangling Desdemona, with an act of parodic (and unanswered) violence.

<sup>105</sup> Lisa M. Anderson, 'From blackface to "genuine negroes": nineteenth-century minstrelsy and the icon of the "negro"', in *Theatre Research International* 21 (1996): 17. Anderson traces the American white minstrel tradition (of white actors in blackface) to the early eighteenth century. Centering almost exclusively around the lot of the southern black slave, white performers portrayed blacks as passive, rightfully dispossessed, and content to be enslaved.

<sup>106</sup> *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 3. Writing in the *North Star* on 27 October, 1848, Frederick Douglass accused blackface impersonators of being 'the filthy scum of white society who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow citizens'. Cited in Dymphna Callaghan, "'Othello was a white man": properties of race on Shakespeare's Stage', in *Alternative Shakespeares* Volume 2, ed. Terence Hawkes (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 210.

<sup>107</sup> Maher writes of an astonishing 25,000 Shakespeare burlesques between 1850-1900, 'somewhere between two hundred and five hundred of [which] are believed to have been "Ethiopian"'. See 'Ethiopian Skits and Sketches', pp. 186-7. Specific to Britain, Richard Schoch lists 'Ibef's *Othello Travestie* (1813), Mathews' *Othello, the Moor of Fleet Street* (1833), Dowling's *Othello Travestie*

While Aldridge broke theatrical taboo, his revelatory London turn as Othello, even in the year of absolute Abolition, hardly ignited a conscientious social acceptance of blacks: quite the opposite in fact. From the 1840s onwards, Shakespeare ran headlong into 'the phenomenon of the Victorian middle classes' whose 'genteel audiences were...sure that they did not want a cruel barbarous, and least of all a sensuous Othello'.<sup>108</sup> The Victorians were to harden their resolve against their subjects even as they hardened their resolve to augment their subjects' numbers. As Douglas Lorimer puts it, 'an increasing number of spokesmen in the mid-nineteenth century asserted that gentlemen by definition were white, and that a black or brown skin, irrespective of an individual's wealth, learning or manner, marked that individual as a member of the inferior orders'.<sup>109</sup> At the same time, non-theatrical Negrophobia was fulminating: 'The 1850s and 1860s saw the birth of scientific racism and a change in English racial attitudes from the humanitarian response of the early nineteenth century to the racialism of the imperialist era at the close of the Victorian age'.<sup>110</sup>

Minstrelsy and the burlesques had made parodic targets of both performers of black physicality, and its innate possessors. Richard Schoch tells us that in the Strand Theatre's 1874 revival of H.J. Byron's *The Rival Othellos*, 'the two tragedians impersonated were Irving and Salvini'.<sup>111</sup> That both of these actors had characterised the Moor in ways open to ridicule tells of the vast public knowledge that surrounded performance. In his study of the popularisation of Shakespeare in nineteenth-century America, Lawrence Levine has argued that 'it is difficult to take familiarities with that which is not already familiar; one cannot parody that which is

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(1834), H.J. Byron's *The Rival Othellos* (1861), and the anonymous *Salthello Ovini* (1875), which parodied Salvini's *Othello*. See *Not Shakespeare: Bardolatry and Burlesque in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Stanley Wells also details '*Othello* (c.1870), as performed by Griffin and Christy's Minstrels'. See *Nineteenth-Century Shakespeare Burlesques*, vol. 5, ed. Stanley Wells (London: Diploma Press, 1978), pp. 127-39. For a straight historical interpretation of minstrelsy, see Ray B. Browne, 'Shakespeare in American Vaudeville and Negro Minstrelsy', in *American Quarterly* 12 (1960): 374-91.

<sup>108</sup> Hankey, *Plays in Performance*, p. 62.

<sup>109</sup> *Colour, Class and the Victorians*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>111</sup> *Not Shakespeare: Bardolatry and Burlesque in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 85.

not well known'.<sup>112</sup> As mentioned above, the mesmerising Salvini was soon to be graced with his very own *Salvello Othini*. I would like here to look not at the result of parody, but the original performative tropes employed by these actors, which might well have given rise to Byron's mirthful myth.

As I have said, both Tommaso Salvini and Henry Irving performed the Moor during high-Victoriana, a time of enhanced racial disparagement, when 'it began to be argued that physical type – a set of categories...determined by racial origin – could and did impose limits on cultural achievement'.<sup>113</sup> A generation after the relatively peaceful abolition of slavery in Britain, and even as the war for the soul of blackness was underway in America, Robert Knox restored the essence of John Locke's philosophical investigation: 'Look at the Negro, so well known to you, and say, need I describe him? Is he shaped like any white person? Is the anatomy of his frame, of his muscles or organs like ours? Does he walk like us, think like us, act like us? Not in the least'.<sup>114</sup> Acting 'like us' was once again restored to Othello's histrionics; the *Zeitgeist* gave no welcome to the colour-compromised Moor instantiated by Kean a half-century earlier. This is why Henry Irving rectified his initial, bronzed Moor of 1876. Once again though, he overdetermined, and his return in 1881 was comical as well as misplaced. This is also why Salvini's blackened southern Italian Othello was such a consistent success,<sup>115</sup> and could encapsulate both emotionally and visually the transgressive behavioural patterns of Knox's typological Negro savage.

Irving's Othello of 1876 had administered the now dying personations of an anglicised, whiter-than-thou Moor. The actor's cardinal error was to 'divert attention from the accident of race as the source of disorder'.<sup>116</sup> His chief detractors demanded a greater separation from his audience, the product of 'hardened lines of

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<sup>112</sup> *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 16.

<sup>113</sup> Mary Hamer, 'Black and White: Viewing Cleopatra in 1862', in *The Victorians and Race*, ed. Shearer West (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996), p. 56.

<sup>114</sup> *The Races of Man: A Philosophical Enquiry into the Influence of race over the Destinies of Nations*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London: Henry Renshaw, 1862), pp. 243-4.

<sup>115</sup> Virginia Mason Vaughan confirms that the 'overall direction' through time of Salvini's *Othello* was 'stable'. See '*Othello*': a contextual history, p. 165, fn.28.

<sup>116</sup> Alan Hughes, *Henry Irving, Shakespearean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 142.

racial difference that had come to permeate British culture'.<sup>117</sup> Into his Moor, Irving had put 'more of European culture and refinement than of African imagination and heat of temperament',<sup>118</sup> if he was to succeed, Irving needed to take stock of an Italian's extraordinary emotional range, not to mention the weaponry with which Salvini could fire his intense broadsides. Put another way, 'audiences accustomed to Salvini's seemingly spontaneous emotive force did not want a mechanical moor'.<sup>119</sup>

For research purposes, Irving 'crept in' to a performance by 'the most commercially successful Othello of the nineteenth century',<sup>120</sup> describing him as 'a thing to wonder at'.<sup>121</sup> Irving witnessed how a rival's full-blooded performance stood out (in this and any age) for the fact that the Italian delivered his lines in his native tongue while fellow actors responded in English. Salvini was only ever a foreigner in the first place at Drury Lane, which in this era did his interpretation no harm at all. Henry James was a great admirer: 'He is a magnificent creature, and you are already on his side...you find yourself looking at him, not so much as an actor, but as a hero'.<sup>122</sup> To convey the entirety of his character, Salvini supplemented his delivery of Italian with exquisite gestures designed to mimic precisely Shakespeare's internalised blocking, 'pointing to his heart or his head if they were in the text'.<sup>123</sup>

One of Salvini's prompt books from 1875 details the Italian's gestural responses to the demands of the play.<sup>124</sup> Set in dual language text, with Italian on the left, English on the right, there are pencilled a few telling instructions to the actor. In the margin, next to 'Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore' (3.3.365), the words 'Wild Heart' appear. After Iago recounts his dream, Othello's

<sup>117</sup> Vaughan, *Othello: a contextual history*, p. 179.

<sup>118</sup> Quote from Joseph Knight, in Alan Hughes, *Henry Irving, Shakespearean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 142.

<sup>119</sup> *Othello: a contextual history*, p. 179.

<sup>120</sup> Elise Marks, "'Othello/me": racial drag and the pleasures of boundary-crossing with Othello', in *Comparative Drama* 35 (2001): 105.

<sup>121</sup> Kenneth Richards, 'Shakespeare and the Italian Players in Victorian London', in *Shakespeare and the Victorian Stage*, ed. Richard Foulkes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 244.

<sup>122</sup> Henry James, *The Scenic Art: Notes on Acting and the Drama* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1948), p. 172.

<sup>123</sup> *Othello: a contextual history*, p. 166.

<sup>124</sup> Folger Library Prompt Book *Oth.* 32. Record of Production. A: Tomasso Salvini. London. Drury Lane. 1875.

'Oh, monstrous! monstrous!' (3.3.433) has the word 'snarl' next to it. For Othello's exit at 3.4.95 (after his demands for the handkerchief are rebuffed) there is written in the margin: 'End of horror and hate', while at his final speech, 'Soft you, a word or two...' (5.2.339), comes the word 'weeps'. These annotations may seem unremarkable, yet if we accept that they are from Salvini's hand, the fact that they appear in English from an Italian speaking Othello would itself be noteworthy. When they are considered in relation to the magnificent denouement they anticipate, they become powerful statements of Salvini's racial understanding:

As he says, 'I took by the throat,' he snatches the naked sword from the table, and goes quickly to centre... At the words 'and smote him,' he cuts the Turk's throat. He stands, thereafter, for a moment, with both arms extended: the left, clutching the Turk; the right, holding the sword. There is a momentary pause, as of irresolution – the instinctive shrinking of a strong man brought face to face with death. Then, with arms still extended, he glances hastily around at the group behind him (to his left), and steps a pace or two backward. Then he seizes the point of the curved sword with his left hand, grasps the blade, just below the hilt, with his right hand, and, leaning backward as he says 'thus' ('*così*'), he draws it violently across his throat, sawing backward and forward. His head falls back, as if more than half-severed from his body; he drops the sword and staggers backward (his full front to the audience) toward the alcove; but before he can reach the bed, he falls backward, and dies, in strong convulsions of the body and the legs. Quick curtain.<sup>125</sup>

Creative brutality was the high-point of Salvini's interpretation. The shifting parameters of Victorian representation had earlier moved to stifle Irving's Anglo-centric response to blackness, anticipating the question later posed by Michel Foucault: 'How is it that thought detaches itself from the squares it inhabited before...and allows what less than twenty years before had been posited and affirmed in the luminous space of understanding to topple down into error, into the realm of fantasy, into non-knowledge?'<sup>126</sup> The detachment – Bhabha's disavowal, was connected to

<sup>125</sup> Edward Tuckerman Mason, *The Othello of Tommaso Salvini* (New York and London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1890), pp. 106-7. 'Othello slashed his own throat with a scimitar, "hacking and hewing at the flesh, severing all the cords, pipes and ligatures that there meet, and making the hideous noises that escaping air and bubbling blood are likely to produce"'. Cited in Kenneth Richards, 'Shakespeare and the Italian Players', p. 244.

<sup>126</sup> 'The Limits of Representation', in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), p. 217.

the establishment of tight anti-miscegenation laws in the United States, the expansion of Britain's overseas empire, and widely disseminated theories of racial Darwinism [which] mark a major shift from the eighteenth and earlier nineteenth centuries. Lines of difference... were more rigidly defined and codified. Audiences continued to respond to the humanity of Shakespeare's tragic hero, only now their sense of his Otherness was stronger than it had been before.<sup>127</sup>

Spectacle once again demanded a confirmed, visualised separation from the Other. So Irving fought back and in the greatest tradition of theatre, he gave them what they wanted (subject to the received cultural transition outlined by Douglas Lorimer): 'In the perception of the Victorians, the physical characteristics of peoples of African descent remained constant, but the psychological and social attributes assigned to the stereotype of the "Negro" altered according to changes in the context of the observer'.<sup>128</sup> Five years on, taste required more sensation, more transgression; 'in 1881 [Irving] gave in, wearing heavy, black make-up and exotic Moorish costumes [in] the guise of a "man of southern temperament"'.<sup>129</sup>

Seemingly swayed by the darkness of Salvini's moor, which would be fresh in the minds of his viewers, Irving reinscribed blackness. Fatally, though, he omitted to shed his sense of deportment, and the fact of a limitless temperament mediated by social propriety would have confounded (and most likely amused) the spectator. Marvin Rosenberg thought Irving *redux* 'neither noble enough nor murderer enough', not to mention the 'curious mannerisms... that audiences sometimes found ludicrous', which I suspect brings him closer to the flailings of David Garrick in the previous century.<sup>130</sup> Alan Hughes is more charitable towards Irving's Othering abilities, observing the audience's rapture at the spectacle of each costume's 'picturesque richness'. He also confirms Irving's obvious debt to Salvini, in that he had become notably more violent in the bedroom scene when, abandoning reticence, he seized Desdemona, and flung her onto the bed.<sup>131</sup> That Desdemona,

<sup>127</sup> 'Othello': a contextual history, p. 162.

<sup>128</sup> Douglas A Lorimer, 'Race, science and culture: historical continuities and discontinuities, 1850-1914', in *The Victorians and Race*, ed. Shearer West (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996), p. 19.

<sup>129</sup> 'Othello': a contextual history, pp. 179-80.

<sup>130</sup> *The Masks of Othello*, p. 77.

<sup>131</sup> See *Henry Irving, Shakespearean*, pp. 148-50.

Ellen Terry, had her own record of Irving's zeal, so distant was it from Edwin Booth's lightness of touch in 1881: "I shall never make you black," [Booth] said one morning. "When I take your hand I shall have a corner of my drapery in my hand. That will protect you." I am bound to say I thought of Mr Booth's protection with some yearning the next week when I played Desdemona to Henry's Othello. Before he had done with me I was nearly as black as he'.<sup>132</sup>

The fact that Irving saw the need to don again the exotic mantles and to restore fully motivated malignancy towards Desdemona offers a useful example of the tendency for theatrical discourse to mimic racial discourse into regression. Henry Irving had partaken of prevalent polyvalences, having once played Othello as a white man, then convinced that 'Shakespeare had unequivocally drawn him as an Englishman'.<sup>133</sup> How distant this was from Garrick's conviction that Othello was a full-blooded African. Yet when yoked to an Italian rival's intensely passionate and visually fiery Moor, Irving's representation was likewise temporally inappropriate. By later placing the Other at an obviously greater distance, Irving's swerve brought home the hardening of English attitudes into a rigorous declamation of black inferiority. With his radical amendment, Irving in a sense capitulated and restored to the Moor the kinds of difference that Rymer contested as unworkable – with which Gildon later concurred – that focus on the physical differences so beloved of the 'radical' dogmatists of the eighteenth century.

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In another Folger prompt book from this time, the editor's introduction is heavily underscored at the following passage: 'it is also a singular mistake that they make the brutal ferocity of the common Negro the essence of Othello's character, and degrade his virtues into mere artificial habits, mere empty appearances'.<sup>134</sup> This

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<sup>132</sup> Ellen Terry, *The Story of my Life* (London: Hutchinson, 1908), p. 204. Booth and Irving took turns to play Othello and Iago during the production.

<sup>133</sup> William Winter, *Shakespeare on the Stage* (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1911), p. 249.

<sup>134</sup> *Oth.* 36. Study Book. A: W. Jefferson Winter. (n.d.) B: William Winter. The edition is ed. William J. Rolfe (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1899), p. 25.

comes from stage representation, but the comment yields advice that was now available to filmmakers who were themselves to discover the meaning of artificial habits and empty appearances as *Othello* came to the screen. From the beginning, the Englishman had insurmountable deficiencies with regard to film due, no less, to his lymphatic *sang-froid*. Here it becomes possible to see why Salvini might have prospered at Irving's expense:

Strange as it may seem, the best moving picture actors or actresses are not found in the ranks of American and English professionals. The best material is found in the Latin races. The French and Italian people are notably successful. The explanation of this is that the Anglo-Saxon is more phlegmatic. By reason of his natural suppression of power of expression he fails to attain the same ends that the others mentioned do. There is a lack of required action.<sup>135</sup>

It is a wonder that the London theatre ever existed. But this curious dissection of national characteristics, some fifteen years before cinematic sound was married to image, speaks only to physical posture, to an ability to exteriorise and distil all dramatic content for the benefit of the eye and not the ear. The catch-all is 'required action' and, in the case of *Othello*, the prescription is the mute enactment of powerful noise, the ability to smother and smite in silence while remaining every inch the dusky Moor. In these terms, the eructating Salvini was born for film while Garrick and his Anglo-Moorish brethren were mercifully bound to the stage where the impact of over-restraint was less observable, less damaging.<sup>136</sup> This might also explain why, in the early rush to exploit Shakespeare's cinematic potential, an English *Othello* in blackface was not called to the casting couch.

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<sup>135</sup> 'Film-Picture Actors,' in *Bioscope*, 2 October, 1908, cited in Jon Burrows, "'It would be a Mistake to Strive for Subtlety of Effect': *Richard III* and populist, Pantomime Shakespeare in the 1910s', in *Young and Innocent: The Cinema in Britain, 1896-1930*, ed. Andrew Higson (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), p. 82.

<sup>136</sup> In his ground-breaking work on early filmed Shakespeare, *Shakespeare on Silent Film: A Strange Eventful History* (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1968), Robert Hamilton Ball recalls that Salvini, then a sprightly eighty-three, turned down the chance to play *Othello* on screen in 1912 (p. 150). Hamilton Ball goes on to cite three other non-parodic silent films of *Othello* in the period 1902-22 that did come to the screen. Lost to us are *Othellos* from Italy (1907), Germany (1907), and the USA (1908). For a home-grown Moor of Venice, mainstream English cinema would have to wait until Stuart Burge's *Othello* of 1965, which I will investigate in Chapter IV. An early pamphlet on Shakespeare and film by Peter Morris mentions a 1946 *Othello*, current whereabouts unknown, directed by David Mackane and produced by Marylebone Productions, which runs to forty-four minutes and was 'apparently made with the intention of "popularising" the play [and which] met

Not only was the Englishman unsuited through temperament to appear on screen in a role demanding the gamut of emotions, he was also stymied by the need constantly to refer to theatre. Rachel Low reminds us of the early (and diverse) production emphases placed upon English and Continental Shakespeare, in so much as 'all the British films of Shakespearean plays were adaptations of stage productions already in existence. Many of the foreign versions, however, had been specially produced by the film companies themselves'.<sup>137</sup> This might come to answer for why each of the films I am going to investigate explicitly liberates, even in the earliest years of film, theatre's spatial restrictions, creating their own awareness of film's distant horizons.<sup>138</sup>

If the physically coy Anglo-Saxon failed to embrace the higher qualities of screen acting, for success he could always fall back upon the performative tropes of his black brethren which remained doggedly pegged to their colour: 'the early films continued in the tradition of minstrel shows, with farces of black life in the Old South and burnt cork for make up. Black roles in the theatre and film were initially performed by whites, while blacks themselves were allowed to play the part of comic buffoons or faithful servants, plantation uncles and broad-bosomed mammies'.<sup>139</sup>

From the beginnings of film, then, black skin appeared on screen, although the black presence served as much to confirm racial stereotypes as to promote creative equality. A fairly typical representation, like *Nègres dansant dans la rue* (or *The Wandering Negro Minstrels*), made in 1896, shows 'half-a-dozen blackface minstrels busking on a London street. For just 45 seconds they sing, dance and play

with a qualified welcome from the critics'. See *Shakespeare on Film: An Index to William Shakespeare's Plays on Film* (Ottawa: Canadian Film Institute, 1964), p. 12.

<sup>137</sup> *The History of the British Film, Volume II: The History of British Film 1906-1914* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 188. In her third volume, *The History of British Film 1914-1918*, Low reports that in this later period, during World War One, 'Shakespeare had been abandoned' (p. 185).

<sup>138</sup> In an engaging piece of scholarship, Roberta Pearson concerns herself with how response readings to Shakespeare created an idyllically (and anachronistically) visual Stratford-upon-Avon in the realm of early silent film. Although she does not touch upon the films themselves, her article gives solid contextual background to the ideologies which umbrella these proto-cinematic representations. See 'Shakespeare's Country: The National Poet, English Identity and British Silent Cinema', in *Young and Innocent: The Cinema in Britain, 1896-1930*, pp. 176-90.

<sup>139</sup> Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*, p. 146.

banjos, tambourines and bones to the delight of a group of working-class men'.<sup>140</sup> While such representations were not without political currency, they also gave credibility to this new group-activity of sitting in the dark: 'By reproducing stereotypes and mocking marginal social groups the new medium ingratiated itself with mainstream audiences and established its reputation'.<sup>141</sup> The white screen needed black smudges.<sup>142</sup> As long as it was clear where white and black began and ended, all was well. Donald Bogle historicises the quintessential paradox within the camera's gaze:

The year 1903 gave birth to the first black character in cinema, Uncle Tom in Edwin S. Porter's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*... in actuality Tom was not black at all. Instead he was a nameless, slightly overweight white actor made up in blackface. But the use of whites in black roles was then a common practice, a tradition carried over from the stage and maintained during the early days of silent film.<sup>143</sup>

For the period 1900-1915, Daniel Leab notices characteristics attributed to blacks on screen which we can take all the way back to Aaron's own reported appearance in *Titus Andronicus*, in that the role 'was usually portrayed by a white in blackface as wooly headed, thick lipped, and very dark skinned... the movie black often was presented in ways that tended to give the character humiliating or demeaning aspects'.<sup>144</sup> James Snead sees these codings as 'eternal, unchanging, unchangeable'.<sup>145</sup> In this sense, Othello, for his confusing place as an empowered, derided black man of nobility and uncontrollable aggression, may well be described as an atypicality. Leab goes on to remind us of the danger of visualising

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<sup>140</sup> Stephen Bourne, *Black in the British Frame: Black People in British Film and Television 1896-1996* (London and Washington: Cassell, 1998), p. 1.

<sup>141</sup> Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*, p. 146.

<sup>142</sup> Other works that have contributed to my understanding of early black filmic representation are Gary Null, *Black Hollywood: The Negro in Motion Pictures* (Secaucus, N.J.: The Citadel Press, 1977), Mark A. Reid, *Redefining Black Film* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/Oxford: University of California Press, 1993), and the excellent collection edited by Valerie Smith: *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video* (London: The Athlone Press, 1997).

<sup>143</sup> *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 1994), p. 3.

<sup>144</sup> *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1973), pp. 11, 16.

<sup>145</sup> *White Screens, Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 2-3.

consanguination at this time, arguing that ‘if a mix-up between the races was considered cute and a subject for comedy, a mixture of blood was the occasion for tragedy’.<sup>146</sup>

The earliest surviving tragedy of *Othello* on film is to all appearances lavishly budgeted.<sup>147</sup> The Pathé brothers’ Moor is ‘very light skinned’, Iago is ‘a fat little fellow, [who] carries within him the hint of malevolence needed for the role’ while, in the version available at the Folger, the brothers’ title cards are in Russian, which reveals ‘the *international* flavor of silent films’.<sup>148</sup> There is otherwise little to say of exoticisation here, specifically towards racial determination. Instead, across ten rough-hewn scenes we see, for the first time, Venice: ‘Imposing facades, beautiful colonnades, magnificent porticos and marvellously wrought gateways... The film is colored with the usual Pathé excellence, and it is well to note that costuming and interior decorations are absolutely correct to the period’.<sup>149</sup> This natural setting must have been a real surprise – not to mention a treat – to early Shakespeare on film viewers.

What these scenes enjoy is the projection of innocence through highly stylised *mise-en-scène* expositions. Othello is caped in ornate embroideries throughout but is not visually separated in this regard. What differentiates him is his manic physical run-in to the denouement. The early camera still sought theatrical expositions of drama; Othello’s physical quandary here is whether to slash his wife with a scimitar or strangle her. Using film to recall Salvini’s ultra-violent end, Othello cuts his own throat from ear-to-ear, and the footage concludes with him collapsing on his dead wife. While declamation translates silence by copying its signals from scene to scene, we are in no doubt that this is not theatre, and that this new medium contains an expansive interior space for increasing the relevance of Shakespeare.

In tandem with *Bioscope*’s early observations, H.R. Coursen has recently dedicated a small chapter to silent Shakespeare, at one point arguing that ‘the best

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<sup>146</sup> *From Sambo to Superspade*, p. 17.

<sup>147</sup> Pathé Frères, Austria, 1908. Folger Call Number: VCR 169.

<sup>148</sup> Kenneth Rothwell, *Shakespeare on Screen: An International Filmography and Videography* (New York and London: Neal-Schuman Publishers, Inc., 1990), pp. 208-9.

<sup>149</sup> *Moving Picture World*, 19 March, 1910. Cited in *Shakespeare on Silent Film*, p. 104.

of the early films are those from Italy, which had neither the long and wide Shakespearean stage tradition of Great Britain nor the huge and developing continent stretching westward of the United States'.<sup>150</sup> Albeit with the confusing geo-theatrical conflation, the observation is sound in that Arturo Ambrosio's *Othello*, filmed in 1914, instantiated a continental, third way of silent filmmaking, bound neither by insular stage tradition nor motion-picture empire construction.

Otherwise, critical attention to Ambrosio's six reel presentation of *Othello* has tended to condemn the splintered semantic that emerges from a viewing.<sup>151</sup> Kenneth Rothwell sees the film as a 'shambles', as if 'sliced up by a madman', although what remains reveals that the original was 'cinematically sophisticated'.<sup>152</sup> The reels contain scenes which jump from, say, a dead Desdemona (Léna Lenard) with an Othello (Colaci) on the point of slashing his throat with a scimitar, to a resurrected Desdemona in Venice, Emilia at her side, calling up to a balcony where stand Iago (Tolentino) and Roderigo (unnamed).<sup>153</sup> The unfamiliar viewer would make little of the text from the images, although gesture is substantiated by mouthed dialogue, and *vice versa*, which gives some visual fixity to the production of an inaudible text.<sup>154</sup>

When the film reverts to the strangling of Desdemona (reel 5/6), she is made to look Christ-like in a long white gown with a thin band tied around her forehead from which flow her dark, curly locks. As Othello jumps her in the bed the camera withdraws and pans right to a Madonna and Child painting next to which a candle snuffs, seemingly of its own accord. The cinematography here reinforces the notion

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<sup>150</sup> *Shakespeare in Space: Recent Shakespeare Productions on Screen* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), p. 96. Shakespeare even manages to mother invention in early film's history: 'Will Barker, always a bold pioneer, was the first producer to fit 1,000 ft. magazines to his camera, which he did for the filming of long Shakespearean scenes in 1913. The normal capacity of the studio camera was the rather odd length of 350 ft'. See Rachel Low, *The History of British Film, 1914-1918*, p. 244.

<sup>151</sup> 1914, Italy. Thanks to the Motion Picture & Television Reading Room at the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. for arranging my viewing. Call Number: FLA: 1705-1710.

<sup>152</sup> *Shakespeare on Screen: An International Filmography and Videography* (New York and London: Neal-Schuman Publishers, Inc., 1990), p. 210. This latter point is perhaps best displayed by a long-shot of an early morning canal, shrouded in mist, across which from left to right a distant, solitary gondolier punts his empty craft. Robert Hamilton Ball notes that '[a]t some time sequences had been separated for colouring and then spliced according to tone. The narrative is thus helter-skelter' (*Shakespeare on Silent Film*, p. 355).

<sup>153</sup> Lenard is gifted with an ability to make her eyelids flutter like a flapping spool of film.

<sup>154</sup> There are no title cards.

of the sacrifice of a Christian at the very hands of a stranger, and the introduction of such symbolism when working with Shakespeare shows the increasing sophistication not only of production methodologies but of a cinematic audience's receptivity.

Although the filmmakers make no concession to chronology and meaning, there are a couple of key pointers to a separation of Othello from the rest of Venice. Intriguingly, Othello, 'a heavy man who resembles an Italian tenor in blackface',<sup>155</sup> mostly does not wear a hat. This may sound trivial, yet he who is surrounded by the most fashionable topiary is rarely concealed in the same way. Colaci's frizzy hair and shiny face are for all to see (and for all to see all of), a denotation of his blackness and the necessity to appraise its totality, without camouflage.<sup>156</sup> There remained, though, the need to restate that the Moor could not be possibly be from the torrid zones: 'The "noble Moor" has been well represented, both in physique and mental parts. It is hoped that the swarthy features of his double in the pictures will not be mistaken for those of the African type... The gentleness, the noble-mindedness and the horrible fury of the man are well brought out'.<sup>157</sup> As we will see, the history of Colaci's successors on screen is in great part predicated upon the success in employing these particularly westernised binaries.

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What I hope to have shown in this chapter is that both Othello and *Othello* occupy temporary spaces in our imaginative geography, as unstable in performance as in reception. What notionally maintains this parlous state is the coalescence of similarities between Shakespeare's African creation and our subjectifying allotment

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<sup>155</sup> *Shakespeare on Screen: An International Filmography and Videography*, p. 210. Colaci sweats a lot in his blackface while puffing hot breath into what is obviously a very chilly Venice/Cyprus. This makes a snorting horse of the Moor, giving the characterisation an incongruous heat, a misplaced semiotic of passion. The blackface is roughly applied and fades to white under his chin and around his ears.

<sup>156</sup> The actor's wig dislocates tectonically every time Othello throws his hands to his head to signal frustration.

<sup>157</sup> James S. McQuade, 'Ambrosia', in *Moving Picture World*, 1 August, 1914, cited in *Shakespeare on Silent Film*, p. 212.

of the Moor of Venice. What comes as 'that barely sketched form, that rudimentary relation which knowledge must overlay to its full extent, but which continues, indefinitely, to reside below knowledge in the manner of a mute and ineffaceable necessity', performs, upon arrival, not mutely but, as such an important critic as Foucault goes on to observe, with 'the insistent murmur of resemblance'.<sup>158</sup> There is a constant reaching, a stretching of the fingertips on colonising hands, towards black verisimilitude. This is never an holistic exercise, but one that atomises and reconstructs the black figure, casting tropes in accordance with their degree of recognition. White people have never been subjected to this *auto-da-fé*. Similitude necessitates the absence of knowledge. The framework of our presentational subject, Othello, as stood before us warrior-like or not, is rough-hewn, shaky, lacking nuts and bolts, 'lost' in the haste for construction. In striving for essence, absence pervades, denying any sense of cultural equalisation, of a knowing 'enculturation' not of the native, but of the master.

It has also been important to point out eras wherein the increasing Anglicisation of Othello renders him beyond the scope of sociological alignment. Where the American Mary Preston could claim to 'have always *imagined* its hero a *white* man', so the seeing Victorian required precisely the same suspension of the suspension of disbelief.<sup>159</sup> It would be easy to dismiss Preston as a blinkered, white partisan, whose own racist predispositions had numbed her to theatrical possibility, to the enacting of the empowered poet's virtue, *à la* Gildon. But what was *black* about the Othello to whom Preston had access? Written by a white man, performed exclusively by white men in front of white audiences and then reviewed by the white men of the white establishment. What indeed was black about the Moor? Such an arena will be important when I come to discuss the very specific political implications of Welles, Olivier, and more contemporary *Othello* on film collaborators.

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<sup>158</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Representing', in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, pp. 68-9.

<sup>159</sup> 'We may regard, then, the daub of black upon Othello's portrait as an *ebullition* of fancy, a freak of imagination... one of the few erroneous strokes of the great master's brush, the *single* blemish on a faultless work... Othello was a *white* man!'. See *Studies in Shakespeare: A Book of Essays*, in *Women Reading Shakespeare, 1660-1900*, eds. Ann Thompson and Sasha Roberts (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 128-9.

**Chapter III**  
**'Clever as a Waggonload of Monkeys':**  
**The Subjection of the Racial Other in Orson Welles's *Othello***

Given a decade of tireless political broadcasting from the mid 1930s, it would have come as some surprise to Orson Welles (1915-85) to discover that 'despite his overt association with radicalism, [he] appears to have had little personal commitment to politics'.<sup>1</sup> Bearing in mind this American's ardour for racial integration and equalisation, Welles may rightly have baulked at those critics who think he missed a trick in producing on film a bland, uncommitted Othello, 'a light-complexioned Moor [who] consistently underplays any sense of racial difference',<sup>2</sup> and whose blackness 'does not count for much... He is played as very light-complexioned, not at all rude or exotic in speech or manner, and little emphasis is given to lines that evoke his strangeness or cultural alterity'.<sup>3</sup> Welles was, in point of fact, one of the twentieth-century's most committed polemicists both on-and off- stage and screen, one who left a wealth of documentary evidence to support his broad-based, humanitarian political convictions.<sup>4</sup>

In this chapter, I will look firstly to Welles's political manifestations and allegiances, so as to give an ideologic framework to his early theatrical work with Shakespeare, and to his fascination with filming forms of tyranny. This I hope will create a platform for my subsequent critique of Welles's *Othello* and my belief that when we cite this *auteur's* apparent downplaying of the racial card we do so erroneously. He, the great prestidigitator, 'an antagonist of racism and fascism until well into his forties',<sup>5</sup> simply ensures we look the wrong way at the right time to

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<sup>1</sup> John Collick, *Shakespeare, cinema and society* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1989), p. 95.

<sup>2</sup> Peter S. Donaldson, *Shakespearean Films/Shakespearean Directors* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), p. 97.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>4</sup> I have been most ably assisted in this chapter's research by a Helm Fellowship from the Lilly Library at Indiana University. The Lilly Library's Welles mss. collection (which incorporates the Fanto mss.) contains nearly 20,000 items from the actor's career, including scripts, speeches, newspaper columns, lecture tours, and the 1944 US presidential campaign, during which Welles was a fervent, vitalising supporter of the Roosevelt administration.

<sup>5</sup> James Naremore, *The Magic World of Orson Welles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 16.

miss the deftness of his racialising touch: a controlling Iago, divergent lighting, sublime camera work, and a thrilling coordination of text and image.

Via half of Europe and North Africa, Welles gives to us the story of a unique and intelligent Venetian stranger who is coerced into a unique and unintelligible Cypriot chasm. Simon Callow draws our attention to Welles's eclectic humanism; widely travelled and culturally aware, he 'was always able to become part of a different clan with ease: to identify with them, to join in, to be one of them... At various times in his life Welles would become immersed in black life, in Spanish life, in Arab life'.<sup>6</sup> He was chameleonic, but never half-hearted; an internationalist committed to democracy and human rights both within the USA and overseas, Welles was also a 'flat-footed colossus [who] threw himself into propagandising for the Roosevelt administration'.<sup>7</sup> Debarred from active service in World War II by asthma, Welles used the most powerful weapons available to him, conscience and voice, to rail against the organised tyranny that had smothered industrial Europe from the time of Hitler's accession to Reich Chancellor in 1933, when Welles was eighteen-years old.

Throughout his early career, Welles called upon diffuse media to broadcast his agenda of political and social equalisation: he was active in the anti-fascist Free World Congress, and published speeches in its magazine, *Free World*, 'a forum for anti-fascist émigrés and resistance movements'.<sup>8</sup> For six months he wrote a political column for the *New York Post*, 'Orson Welles's Almanac', which came to be 'especially valuable as a record of his preoccupation with world affairs – a preoccupation which bears upon some of the films he would make'.<sup>9</sup> He was also a vociferous radio campaigner who spurned anodyne rhetoric to campaign openly for full black rights:

I was born a white man and until a coloured man is a full citizen like me I haven't the leisure to enjoy the freedom that colored man risked his life to

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<sup>6</sup> *Orson Welles: The Road to Xanadu* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 78.

<sup>7</sup> André Bazin, *Orson Welles: A Critical View* (Los Angeles: Acrobat Books, 1991), p. 87

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Verso, 1996) p. 395. The author devotes a chapter to Welles's work with the Negro Theatre unit of the Federal Theatre and with the Mercury Group Theatre.

<sup>9</sup> James Naremore, *The Magic World of Orson Welles*, p. 137. The column ran from January-June, 1945, the month of the atomic attacks on Japan.

maintain for me. I don't own what I have until he owns an equal share of it. Until somebody beats me and blinds me, I am in his debt. And so I come to this microphone not as a radio dramatist (although it pays better), not as a commentator (although it's safer to be simply that). I come, in that boy's name, and in the name of all who in this land have no voice of their own. I come with a call to action.<sup>10</sup>

His ire had been raised by the 1944 beating and blinding by South Carolinian police officers of a black veteran, Isaac Woodward; the radio campaign with which Welles responded to this injustice is considered 'his most powerful and important political work'.<sup>11</sup> He was also a prominent speaker at war-time peace rallies, ever keen to remind his audience of the twin dangers of racism and fascism,<sup>12</sup> and attended, in 1945, the Pan American War and Peace conference in Mexico City, 'writing for several days about the meeting'.<sup>13</sup>

As his films continue to reveal, Welles was also something of a visionary. Writing of US foreign policy, he becomes our contemporary: 'We'll make Germany's bid for world supremacy look like amateur night, and the inevitable retribution will be on a comparable scale'.<sup>14</sup> And he rarely missed an opportunity to orate to a captive chronicler:

We still hear it said that race prejudice has always existed in the world, that it flourished before Fascism, that to call a man a Fascist because he discriminates against another man on account of race is an improper use of the term. I agree that Fascism is a strong word...but I think that history itself has widened the meaning of the word. I think that long after the last governments that dare to call themselves Fascist have been swept off the face of civilization, the word 'fascism' will live in our language as a word for race hate.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Barbara Leaming's *Orson Welles* (London: Phoenix, 1993), pp. 329-30.

<sup>11</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p. 373. The broadcasts aired on 28 July, and 4, 11, 18, and 25 August, 1944. Denning reports that as a consequence of Welles's polemical fireworks, ABC cut him off, cancelling *The Orson Welles Show*.

<sup>12</sup> On 11 September, 1943, Welles spoke on racism to the 'Mass Rally to Win the Peace' at the Chicago Stadium. He was also 'active in getting CBS to carry radio broadcasts in response to the race riots that had broken out across the United States in the summer of 1943' (Denning, p. 399).

<sup>13</sup> Naremore, p. 138.

<sup>14</sup> But for 'Germany', he might have been speaking of the last two decades. Cited in Naremore, p. 140.

<sup>15</sup> *Orson Welles Interviews*, ed. Mark W. Estrin (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), p. 57.

Notably, racial abuse and totalitarianism were seen as one by Welles. Southern racist bigotry and Hitlerian fascism were kept in the same box, marked 'Megalomania': 'For several generations maybe, there will be men who can't be weaned from the fascist vices of race hate. We should deny such men responsibility in public affairs...There are laws against peddling dope; there can be laws against peddling race hate'.<sup>16</sup> With Welles's conflation of fascism and racism (and his constant need to pronounce upon both) comes the realisation that he was no accidental politician, no fashionable radical. Fully engaged in the political process, he was a famous man with a strong conscience, a Stentor who had at his disposal both a powerful rhetoric and the media by which to disburse his words.

It is important to remember that Welles's politics bled openly into his theatrical and film ventures. His opposition to all forms of totalitarianism filters into his actual and virtual output. Welles pronounced a need to play over-sized bigots, 'tyrannical egotists, men who try to imitate God',<sup>17</sup> so as to place monstrosity on American doorsteps. In order to understand his abstracted enemy, Welles chose to become him in front of a camera. Mindful of the controversy that he courted, he was also very keen to point out that in spite of Gallic uncertainty his personal views entirely opposed his creative mindset: 'There is more than one French intellectual who believes I am a Fascist...it's idiotic, but that's what they write...As an actor I always play a certain type of role: Kings, great men, etc...[which] they take...to be a projection of my own personality. I hope the great majority at least considers it obvious that I am anti-Fascist'.<sup>18</sup> To know Welles's opinions of dictators is to get a little closer to Kane, to Kindler, to Kafka and, of course, to Iago.

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<sup>16</sup> *Race Hate Must Be Outlawed*, unpublished, in The Welles mss., 'Speeches and Writings, 1938-1948', Box 5, Folder 9, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Naremore, p. 61.

<sup>18</sup> Conversation with Juan Cobos, Miguel Rubio, and J.A. Pruneda, 1964. Reproduced in *Orson Welles Interviews*, pp. 115-6. Welles's character in *The Lady from Shanghai*, Michael O' Hara, is a gadabout ex- anti-Franco mercenary from the Spanish Civil War whom we know to have killed a man in true 1940s Hollywood style, with bare hands. In *The Stranger*, Welles played a Nazi fugitive from Poland who has destroyed his identity to resurface as a Professor in a leafy, Connecticut college town. Of his atrocities, Franz Kindler is blind to sin; his pursuer, however, has a moral crisis, turns to God, and is strangled by Kindler while praying for forgiveness. (And all this on Kindler's wedding night. Filmland is a busy place.) Kindler, like Othello, marries above his social rank; his bride is the daughter of a Supreme Court judge. Certain threads start to intertwine, giving rise to a propensity for strangulation as a means to true silence. To Welles, the surest way to understand his paranoid enemy is not to confront him but to become him, which would explain his decision to film

When we consider Welles thought fascism to be ‘nothing more than the original sin of civilization, the celebration of power for its own sake...some form of nationalism gone crazy’,<sup>19</sup> and that he thought Othello to be ‘the archetype of the simple man [who] has never understood the complexity of the world or of human beings’,<sup>20</sup> a picture starts to emerge of how Iago, such a celebrant, might confront Othello, such an innocent. Welles paints the mood underlying his despotic representations: ‘I believe one only has the right to judge if one does it according to the principles of a religion or a law, or both; otherwise if people simply decide personally whether somebody is guilty or innocent, good or bad, the door is open to people who lynch their fellow-men, to gangsters who walk the streets doing what they like, it’s the law of the jungle’.<sup>21</sup> He also shows a clear understanding of the religio-political ideology that fuelled Samuel Purchas’s armchair pilgrimage in Chapter I: ‘the idea of racial superiority as an excuse for aggression was developed in modern times by the English...The Englishman, nominally sentimental, normally humanitarian...adopted the Hebraic proposition that heaven had specially appointed his race for supremacy. Like the Spanish before him, the subjugation of millions of people, their merciless slaughter and enslavement, was excused on the grounds that he was fulfilling the will of God’.<sup>22</sup>

In spite of John Collick’s claim, Welles was a political animal. As well as using his fame to pronounce against fascism, he was a fierce anti-segregationist and friend of black artists. This left-leaning outlook came to inform a great deal of his earlier theatre-work and latter movie-making: ‘Welles’s revival of the classics was not only an act of preservation in the face of fascism, a defense of civilization

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*The Trial* in 1962 with Anthony Perkins as Joseph K. Welles was not short of words for his control freaks: ‘Kane, too, abuses the power of the popular press and challenges the authority of the law, contrary to all the liberal traditions of civilisation. He also has very little respect for what I consider to be civilization, and tries to become the king of the universe...similarly Harry Lime, who’d like to make himself the king of a world which has no law. All these people have this in common, and they all express, in their different ways, the things I most detest’ (*Orson Welles Interviews*, p. 53).

<sup>19</sup> Cited in Denning, pp. 376, 395.

<sup>20</sup> Orson Welles and Peter Bogdanovich, *This is Orson Welles*, ed. Jonathan Rosenbaum (London: Harper Collins, 1993), pp. 232-3.

<sup>21</sup> André Bazin, Charles Bitsch, and Jean Domarchi, *Cahiers du Cinéma* [September 1958], cited in *Orson Welles Interviews*, pp. 52-3.

<sup>22</sup> *Survival of Fascism*, speech delivered to the ‘Modern Forum’ at the Wilshire Ebell Theatre, Los Angeles, on 4 December, 1944. The Welles mss., ‘Speeches and Writings, 1938-1948’, Box 5, Folder, pp. 11-12.

against barbarism. For Welles, the Elizabethan tragedies and histories of Marlowe offered a critique of fascism's worship of power, and their giant protagonists paralleled the "great dictators" of modern times'.<sup>23</sup> It is surprising therefore to find that although Shakespeare lends himself to the type of totalitarianism that was Welles's creative catalyst, the marriage of Welles's political ideology to Shakespeare's critiques of power has rarely been discussed.

Welles strove not just to popularise Shakespeare's tragic canon, but to tie in his grandstanding villains with European *Realpolitik*. He who 'would make Shakespeare more accessible to the public while largely respecting the integrity of the text',<sup>24</sup> had tasked himself with exposing political analogues, of finding from within his beloved Shakespearean canon tragedies which could speak vociferously to his own troubled times. In 1936, on this great polemical curve, Welles, at twenty-one, came with a commitment to black politics and to black theatre.<sup>25</sup> He understood the demeaning circumstances that gave rise to black theatrical employment and was determined to open the theatrical experience to motivated, black actors, 'to give to Negro artists, many of whom are very talented, an opportunity to play in the sort of thing that is usually denied them. The parts that fall to Negroes are too often old mammies with bandanas, water-melon eating piccaninnies, Uncle Rastuses and so on'.<sup>26</sup> In conjunction with the Federal-funded Works Progress Administration Theater Project (WAP), Welles brought to New York an all-black telling of *Macbeth* – 'Voodoo' *Macbeth* – which opened on 9 April at the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem with Jack Carter in the title role. The play ran for fourteen weeks and from 6 July, 1936, onwards, toured the country for thirteen more.

Welles took his context for the play from nineteenth-century, anti-French slave revolts in Haiti, from Aimé Césaire's referential *La Tragédie du Roi Christophe*, and from Eugene O'Neill's contemporary updating of the revolts in his 1920 stage play, *Emperor Jones*. Scotland became Haiti, 'using authentic witch

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<sup>23</sup> Denning, p. 376.

<sup>24</sup> Cited in Errol Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable*, p. 111.

<sup>25</sup> At Simon Callow's invitation, Welles too joins the Roscius club, as their 'adolescent' representative. See *The Road to Xanadu*, p. 107.

<sup>26</sup> Welles, cited in Bazin, p. 43.

doctors and jungle drums, and transforming the witches into voodoo priestesses'.<sup>27</sup> Notwithstanding the fabulous mechanics of his production, there were widespread complaints that Welles's assortment of actors failed to articulate the Shakespearean verse and that 'it was difficult for critics to view them as Shakespearean actors rather than awkward blacks in Shakespearean costumes'.<sup>28</sup> The cast had no classical training, but this was a boon to Welles who would brook no argument with prescribed manners of Shakespearean versification; he decried stereotypical elitist arguments as bound, simply, unto their own class: 'The Negro actors have never had the misfortune of hearing Elizabethan verse spouted by actors strongly flavoring of well-cured Smithfield. They read their lines just as they would any others. On the whole, they're no better and no worse than the average white actor before he discovered the red plush style'.<sup>29</sup>

With Welles's total commitment to racial parity, the result was a physical, colour-filled *Macbeth*, visually far removed from the Scottish play, yet whose relevance for humanity was broadened in the production on stage of black values amid black turmoil. One critic had the feeling that 'every night... here were people on a voyage of discovery in the theatre'.<sup>30</sup> A second critic saw the play only in terms of its author, and not in terms of racial equalisation: 'Although they have taken the greatest liberties with tradition, the producers have left the text of the play almost intact, thus producing a curious and not altogether successful contrast. The play was enthusiastically received by an audience consisting almost entirely of negroes'.<sup>31</sup> It was as if Welles had created entertainment for blacks alone instead of asking some searching questions of Shakespeare's white owners:

The Negro press, it should be noted, was generally favorable to the production; its reviewers did not seem to find it condescending or in any way preposterous. If, on the other hand, you are inclined to see the combination of Negroes and Shakespeare as ludicrous, either from racist impulses or from

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<sup>27</sup> Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable*, p. 103.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 105-6.

<sup>29</sup> *The Road to Xanadu*, p. 235.

<sup>30</sup> 'Orson Welles', in *New York Times*, 29 August, 1936. Cited in Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable*, p. 106.

<sup>31</sup> 'Harlem Negroes in "Macbeth"', in *The Times*, 16 April, 1936; pg. 12; Issue 47350; col B.

liberal discomfort, the voodoo *Macbeth* provides plenty of ammunition for those on this side of the controversy as well.<sup>32</sup>

The stripling director was already alert to potential problems in the display of black skin on stage, which was 'difficult to light because of the light-absorbing properties of darker pigmentation'. Welles's lighting designer, Abe Feder, 'devised light-friendly make-ups and a series of gels specially suited to the actors' pigmentations; the rule of thumb hitherto had been "Amber for negroes"'. Welles managed to politicise even his lighting, 'helping to break down time-bound, dehumanising visual stereotypes',<sup>33</sup> focussing more on the effects of lighting on black skin, on the expediency of considered similitude which would later fully inform his film of *Othello*. Welles's experiments with the tyrannical extended, in the following year, to *Julius Caesar*, which he directed to create a dramatic vehicle for his disgust at the totalitarianism that had smothered Spain, Italy and Germany. The play opened on 11 November, 1937. 'At the height of European fascism,' wrote Bazin, 'this modernization had an audacious impact'.<sup>34</sup> Once again, Welles was determined to enliven the sedate conscience. 'I'm trying to let Shakespeare's lines do the job of making the play applicable to the tensions of our time', he wrote of the production.<sup>35</sup>

His costumes were tailored to Reich requirements, the lighting was based on Goebbels's and Speer's 1936-37 Nuremberg spectacles, with stark, heaven-bound beams creating more theatrical 'bars' from floor to ceiling. The murder of Cinna the Poet was, to Welles, an opportunity to shock with its mindless aggression: 'It's the same mob that hangs and burns Negroes in the South, the same mob that maltreats the Jews in Germany. It's the Nazi mob anywhere'.<sup>36</sup> Through Welles, Shakespeare had full representative rights in contemporary political debate.

Away from the theatre Michael Anderegg notes how filmmaker and fascism combined in *Macbeth*, Welles's cheap-rate 1948 telling, famed for wobbly sets and

<sup>32</sup> Michael Anderegg, *Orson Welles, Shakespeare, and Popular Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 25.

<sup>33</sup> Callow, *The Road to Xanadu*, p. 231.

<sup>34</sup> *Orson Welles: A Critical View*, p. 44.

<sup>35</sup> *The Mercury... Weekly Bulletin of information*, undated, in The Welles mss., Box 5, Folder 33 (*Julius Caesar*).

<sup>36</sup> Cited in Denning, p. 375.

a range of Caledonian accents unlikely to be heard again. The *foci* of the critic's response are

the shots in which Welles's figure, back, or head fill the entire screen [which] make sense primarily as a response to the image of the dictator in so many newsreels and films of the thirties and forties; one might simply point to *Triumph of the Will* (1934), whose images of massed crowds are constantly juxtaposed to close shots of Hitler, his head at times silhouetted against a black sky. Although Welles deliberately eschews the grandeur of Riefenstahl...he nevertheless hints at a similar effect.<sup>37</sup>

Leni Riefenstahl's glorifying über-films give us an unusual conduit into a fascist aesthetics of black skin and point us towards the misplaced ethics against which Welles made his powerful protests.<sup>38</sup> A 1970s collection of Riefenstahl's photographs of the wrestling Nuba tribesmen of Central Sudan was greeted with disparagement by Susan Sontag, who smears Riefenstahl's attempted aesthetic repentance, convinced that these black corporeal eulogies 'are continuous with her Nazi work'.<sup>39</sup> Sontag goes on to outline the Hitlerian paradigms maintained by Riefenstahl for the performative, obeisant body, tropes with which Welles will engage his Iago:

Fascist aesthetics...flow from (and justify) a preoccupation with situations of control, submissive behaviour, extravagant effort, and the endurance of pain; they endorse two seemingly opposite states, egomania and servitude. The relations of domination and enslavement take the form of a characteristic pageantry: the massing of groups of people; the turning of people into things; the multiplication or replication of things; and the grouping of people/things around an all-powerful, hypnotic leader-figure or force.<sup>40</sup>

It is easy to imagine such a role as Macbeth sating the Welles palate, the sound and fury lending themselves to dictatorial rampage, to alternating impositions of 'ceaseless motion and a congealed, static, "virile" posing'.<sup>41</sup> What though can we

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<sup>37</sup> Orson Welles, *Shakespeare, and Popular Culture*, p. 96.

<sup>38</sup> As Hitler's personal filmmaker, Riefenstahl gave to the world a number of terrifying texts, willed exposés of domination, namely, *Triumph of the Will* (1934), *Day of Freedom* (1935), *Olympia Part One: Festival of the Nations* (1938), and *Olympia Part Two: Festival of Beauty* (1938).

<sup>39</sup> Leni Riefenstahl, *The Last of the Nuba* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); Susan Sontag, 'Fascinating Fascism', in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative Society, Ltd., 1983), p. 86.

<sup>40</sup> Sontag, p. 91.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

understand of the physical unleashing of Iago and concomitant restraint of the Moor? What I will attempt to show is Welles's anti-fascist credo at work in both the submissive, black body of Othello, and in the extravagance of the white body of the egomaniacal Iago.

Sontag's synthesis of movement and stasis might specifically refer to the double funeral that opens *Othello*. Critics have noted the points of comparison between Welles's obsequies and the ritual of death in Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) and *Ivan the Terrible* (1944-46),<sup>42</sup> each of which in these terms becomes a free-flowing, expressionistic response to an ordered, geometrised celebration. There is, I believe, a case for responding to Welles's *Othello* through Sontag's critique of Riefenstahl; that since her understanding of fascist aesthetics is based upon 'the containment of vital forces [in which] movements are confined, held tight, held in',<sup>43</sup> so may we apply to *Othello* the rigidity of architecture, a constrained Moor and an omnipresent Iago.

Welles would also have seen in Dmitri Buchowetski's 1922 *Othello*<sup>44</sup> a use of 'the people' which successfully anticipates fascism's mass rankings. Peter Morris considered Buchowetski's film 'perhaps the first to be seriously considered as valid Shakespearean drama',<sup>45</sup> which would certainly have caught Welles's attentive eye. That Werner Krauss's Iago sports a tiny black moustache and swept-over hair similarly forces one to consider the nexus between Shakespeare and Hitler's early politics of disaffection in that the pogonotrophic signifier 'intensifies our sense of the racist bases of Iago's campaign against Othello', as exemplified throughout by a Iago who 'evinces sharp distaste at physical contact' with the Moor.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *Orson Welles, Shakespeare, and Popular Culture*, pp. 103-4. Bazin says of the duo that 'both have the same set purpose... both have the same skill in using the camera's *foremost* power, to transfigure reality on the plane of shooting; both have the same confidence in the effects inherent in real or theoretical *montage*, carrying grace to the implicit or explicit "attraction"'. See *Orson Welles: A Critical View*, p. 121.

<sup>43</sup> Sontag, p. 93.

<sup>44</sup> Wörner Films, Germany, 1922. Folger Call Number: DVD 10.

<sup>45</sup> *Shakespeare on Film: An Index to William Shakespeare's Plays on Film* (Ottawa: Canadian Film Institute, 1964), p. 2.

<sup>46</sup> Stephen M. Buhler, *Shakespeare in the Cinema: Ocular Proof* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), pp. 14-15. The moustache is a grand spectacle of gravity-defiance: the hairs are waxed and made to point upwards, like tiny aerials, towards Iago's nose.

More persuasive indebtedness comes as Buchowetski gathers huge crowds together – a kind of unofficial people’s tribune – whose collective *Kampf* presents them as silent barometers of Venetian sentiment. Although Kenneth Rothwell, in Churchillian mood, laments that ‘never have so many extras done so much to accomplish so little’,<sup>47</sup> there is genuine substance to Buchowetski’s near obsessive juxtaposing of white crowds against a solitary black man. As the happy couple traverse the threshold and Othello (Emil Jannings)<sup>48</sup> swallows his new wife (Ika von Lenceffy) into the folds of his mighty white cloak, an ecstatic crowd gathers to scream its tacit ‘Othello! Othello!’ in support of the Moor. These gatherings will be repeated throughout the film, the excitable people will come together to form a collective voice, and it is pro-Stranger, for the Moor’s marriage is clearly popular in Venetian society.

The crowd also holds some collective sway with the hierarchy. As they scream for the Moor outside the Senate, both Othello and the Duke turn their eyes to the wall, hearing the approval. The adulation continues overseas as a board announces ‘With the falling of night all Cyprus gathers to honor the general’, which is followed by the crowd rushing to greet their man. Later, ‘in a moment that has been seen as demagogic’,<sup>49</sup> Cassio addresses the great crowd with the news that Othello is dead. Previously remarkable for its excitement, the crowd is immobile, silent even for silent film, aware that their hero is a Moor no more, not to mention that the new boss has an alcohol problem. In Buchowetski, Welles would have seen an Othello who is more important to the populous as a warrior who will save them from the Turk than as a lover who will steal one of their own. His race is of concern only to the Venetian gerontocracy, not to its people on the streets, a point not to be overlooked, one which suggests a divide in the classes’ opinion over the presence and position of the army general. Welles’s response to Buchowetski’s geometric manipulations comes, as I have said, at the opening of his film. These

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<sup>47</sup> *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television*, p. 26.

<sup>48</sup> Robert Hamilton Ball thought Emil Jannings’s Othello to be ‘almost animal, gorilla-like in face and passion without dignity or tragic intensity’ (*Shakespeare on Silent Film*, p. 279). Roger Manvell thought him ‘a brutal Othello’. See *Shakespeare and the Film* (New York and Washington: Praeger Publishers, 1971), p. 21.

<sup>49</sup> Russell Jackson, ‘Two silent Shakespeares: *Richard III* and *Othello*’, in *Cineaste* 28.2 (2003): 50.

directors' *Othellos* sit prominently at either end of Europe's experiment with fascist dictatorship, the former adducing a glorification of mass control, the latter a bitter critique of its effects.

Patently, then, Welles was a committed activist both on and off stage and screen, one whose voice could not be reined in by the muffling techniques of soft-soap networks. Yet while accepting Welles's political dedication, Peter Donaldson is ambivalent towards the results of his bullish delivery: 'Welles took courageous, self-risking stands on civil rights, and his efforts to put himself in the place of the oppressed and to speak for them are often moving. But can it be said that his attempts to speak for the pain of others were free of grandiose posturing, or that they did not displace and subtly disempower those he claimed to speak for?'.<sup>50</sup>

To gauge the political fall-out of film is near impossible, only the rarest of creatures will ever impact. Yet if there was one filmmaker capable of unsettling a comfortable American bourgeoisie it was Welles, whose notorious *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast in October, 1938, had most of New Jersey quivering with fear of extra-terrestrials, and whose *Citizen Kane* of 1941 had forced armchair America to confront a megalomaniac at home. With his adaptation for the stage of Richard Wright's *Native Son* in the same year, Welles combined creatively with the greatest black writer of his age, whose autobiography Welles would later beg his radio listeners to read.<sup>51</sup> Publicity material for the production firmly evidences Welles's commitment to ending the effective *Apartheid* prevalent on America's streets. In 'Blueprint for an Emergency', there appears the following statement:

The main angle to be stressed is what *Native Son* means to the Negro people. They must see that the success or failure of this show will influence the type of Negro production on Broadway for many years to come. If the show fails, producers will be reluctant to present Negroes in anything but the old and highly undesirable formulas; as clowns, rapist [sic] or creatures just a little better than the apes... The Negroes have been complaining, and rightly, for years about the way their lives have been depicted in the American theatre... *Native Son* voices their aspirations, problems, etc., with clarity and

<sup>50</sup> *Shakespearean Films/Shakespearean Directors*, pp. 125-6, fn. 25.

<sup>51</sup> Welles protested on-air that whites who thought they might 'understand the Negro' should be 'tied down with banjo strings, gagged with bandannas, their eyes propped open with watermelon seeds, and made to read "Black Boy" word for word' (Cited in Naremore, p. 217).

conviction and now is the time to throw their complaints right back in their laps...<sup>52</sup>

Richard Wright was also sensitive to the mistranslation of black emotional expression, to the confused, white understanding of black fervour, for which *Othello* is damned: 'After I had learned other ways of life I used to brood upon the unconscious irony of those who felt that Negroes led so passionnal an existence! I saw that what had been taken for our emotional strength was our negative confusions, our flights, our fears, our frenzy under pressure'.<sup>53</sup> What Richard Wright helps me to assert is that Welles had subtler reasoning to hand; that his diminution of physicality does not call into question his ability to portray black, emotional strength. Welles's dispassionate-seeming Moor is in fact a study of how the self-analysing black confronts the contradiction rooted in genuine passions that are misrepresented.

Still, Donaldson asks us to consider whether Welles might not have produced a reversal of his desired effect. But grandiose posturing is both the stuff of films and of fascism and, at least with *Othello*, a critique of grandiose posturing is foremost in the director's mind. The prevalent fascism that moulded the Welles mind was Nazism; the continued diminution of the black races was born of the same fanatical pursuit of control. 'Fascism must be born out of chaos', declared Welles in the 60s.<sup>54</sup> Looking to his *Othello* some twenty years earlier, it would be safe to say that Fascism had come again.

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<sup>52</sup> *Blueprint for an Emergency*, in The Welles mss., 'Theatre – *Native Son*', Box 6, Folder 28, p. 1.

<sup>53</sup> Richard Wright, *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* [1945] (London: Picador Classics, 1988), p. 46. Wright's self-reportage, from 1912-1927, is of the boy-outsider to both the black community and to the Southern whites who dominated every black thought. Unaccepted by both black and white, 'Richard' hops from liminality to liminality, with a burgeoning mind angered by his violent upbringing and a yearning to travel to a mythical 'North', upon which he finally embarks at the age of nineteen.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Juan Cobos, Miguel Rubio, and J.A. Pruneda, *Orson Welles Interviews*, p. 113.

Since a goal of this chapter is to restore to this film the racial sub-text whose presence has been doubted by critics who assert that the Moor lacks passion and whose similitude fails, it would be as well to offer a brief overview of the genre-busting framework of the film, 'which aims at reconciling theatrical drama with the realism of non-theatrical spatial elements',<sup>55</sup> so as to research Welles's plausible reasoning behind his cogitative, slumberous Moor, and to determine whether this choice negates racial substance.

The sporadic shooting sequence of *Othello* is legendary. Welles and crew enjoyed something of a Grand Tour of two continents while he constantly sought funds to continue the project. A measure of the confusion in the director's mind comes in a communication to his friend and cameraman, Georges Fanto: 'Who else is on salary? What exactly is our pay-roll?...What are we committing ourselves for?'.<sup>56</sup> Such unstable planning goes hand in hand with the film's diffuse geography, although the constant shifting between North Africa and Europe lends itself to a representation of a dualised Moor: 'By photographing on location in Venice, Mogador, Perugia, Safi, and elsewhere, Welles makes vivid and tangible the implicit orientalizing tendencies of Shakespeare's text'.<sup>57</sup> He also makes a virtue of impecuniousness.

*Othello* is certainly a cheap film, in which expressionistic brilliance and economic frugality are hopelessly intertwined: 'Every time you see someone with his back turned or with a hood over his head, you can be sure it's a stand in. I had to do everything by cross-cutting because I was never able to get Iago, Desdemona, and Roderigo, etc., together at once in front of the camera'.<sup>58</sup> Barbara Leaming

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<sup>55</sup> Anthony Davies, *Filming Shakespeare's Plays: The Adaptations of Laurence Olivier, Orson Welles, Peter Brook and Akira Kurosawa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 100.

<sup>56</sup> M/S letter from Welles to Georges Fanto, dated 14 November, 1950, in The Fanto mss., Box 1, Folder 2. Georges Fanto was a cameraman who worked with Welles throughout the forties and fifties.

<sup>57</sup> *Orson Welles, Shakespeare, and Popular Culture*, p. 109.

<sup>58</sup> *Orson Welles: A Critical View*, p. 109. The constant lack of money available to Welles was not totally due to his flamboyance of spirit. Emergency funds were required in order to avoid a 'great scandal' in Venice, large sums being paid to a litigious Gondolier who, during a spontaneous nocturnal coupling with MacLiammóir, had fallen overboard into the Grand Canal. See Leaming, p. 372. MacLiammóir's memoir of his time filming *Othello*, *Put Money in thy Purse: The filming of Orson Welles's Othello* (London: Columbus Books, 1988), is an amusing source of the tribulations Welles et al. confronted, and one which I will call upon. Pocket Essentials has an excellent chronology of Welles's financial contortions, at

refers to the film's 'fractured texture', which she ascribes to Welles's 'sporadic manner' of filming,<sup>59</sup> while Jonathan Rosenbaum settles simply for Welles's 'new method of filmmaking', one quite distinct from 'the dovetailing continuities of *Kane* and *Ambersons*', which instead 'fragments shots into jagged crazy-quilt patterns and syncopated rhythms'.<sup>60</sup> Welles's technique indeed works to chop the film into messes. The unpredictability of the spectacle led one critic contemporary to Welles to lament that '[t]oo much of the action takes place in semi-darkness', but, nonetheless, that he had witnessed 'one of the most intellectually stimulating, visually beautiful, and emotionally exciting 90 minutes ever to come out of the cinema'.<sup>61</sup> It is hard to disagree. Not so with Kenneth Tynan. The *ne plus ultra* of twentieth-century performance review was less constructive, referring to Welles as 'having the courage of his restrictions' and, hard to believe, to Welles's Moor as 'Citizen Coon', which 'eloquent sarcasm would linger in Orson's thoughts forever after'.<sup>62</sup>

As the London press was apt to point out, with Welles's 1934 upstart, crowing entry into the arena of Elizabethan tragedy, there had begun the twentieth-century battle of Shakespearean *auteurs*, of a liberal America coming to emancipate the old country from its reactionary continuum. Not for the first time, rivalry comes in the form of England's finest: 'Mr Welles' way with Shakespeare is in direct contrast with that of Sir Laurence Olivier. Sir Laurence is content to hold the camera steady on a scene or a speech and to work at least in alliance with the technique of the theatre; Welles revolts from the theatre altogether and, reverting to the technique of the silent film, keeps the whole fluid and in perpetual motion, breaking the text and the action up into vivid fragments'.<sup>63</sup>

That is not to say that the theatrical cannot be found in Welles's performance, which has 'a static grandeur and studied rhetorical manner that suggests the

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<http://www.pocketessentials.com/film/orsonwelles/welles-othello.html>. Neither was there recoupment: the film made a mere \$40,000 on its initial release in 1952.

<sup>59</sup> Leaming, p. 372.

<sup>60</sup> Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Placing Movies: The Practice of Film Criticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 126.

<sup>61</sup> *The Times*, 27 February, 1956; pg. 5; Issue 53465; col C.

<sup>62</sup> Cited in Leaming, p. 384.

<sup>63</sup> *The Times*, 27 February, 1956: 5.

romantic/exotic approach of nineteenth-century British and American “gentleman” actors from John Philip Kemble at the beginning of the century to Edwin Booth and Henry Irving at the close’.<sup>64</sup> To advance Anderegg’s idea, a number of critics have produced variations of ‘static’ in their appraisals of Welles’s appropriation of the Moor. I would like to consider this in racial terms and determine whether it is a justified response. As I have said, race critiques of Welles’s *Othello* are few; Anderegg does ask a worthwhile question, however: ‘Which, in the end, is more “racist”: to underplay Othello’s blackness or to overplay it?’<sup>65</sup> He concludes, as will I, that Welles’s methodology was sound, that in Welles absence has visible essences: ‘the fact that Welles’s performance of Othello presents him as neither wholly black nor wholly white can be seen as strategic rather than evasive. That Othello is a Negro would not have been lost on a contemporary (1950’s) audience, however much Welles underplays the blackness’.<sup>66</sup>

Alfred Jacobs places *Othello* in the *Film Noir* bracket, whose ‘alienated, duplicitous, manipulative, obsessed characters... often demonstrate duality, which functions on a thematic psychological level to reveal their dark and light sides’.<sup>67</sup> The genre would seem to have been made for Iago had he ever thought to don a raincoat and a trilby. Similarly, François Truffaut thought Welles’s film ‘like a thriller – fastening it, in other words, to a popular genre’, which brought the director ‘closer to Shakespeare’.<sup>68</sup> Yet Anthony Davies disagrees, arguing that Welles somehow produced a more elitist representation: ‘Unlike Olivier, whose objective is to make Shakespeare accessible in a narrative sweep to audiences with perhaps only

<sup>64</sup> Anderegg, *Orson Welles, Shakespeare, and Popular Culture*, p. 111.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108. In the only indication I have found of the mechanics of Welles’s face ‘n’ race change, MacLiammoir gushes that he was ‘beautifully dressed up and painted a dark chocolate-brown by Santoli and Vasco’ (*Put Money in Thy Purse*, p. 106).

<sup>66</sup> *Orson Welles, Shakespeare, and Popular Culture*, p. 109.

<sup>67</sup> Alfred Jacobs, ‘Orson Welles’s Othello: Shakespeare Meets Film Noir’, in *Shakespeare and the Twentieth Century: The Selected Proceedings of the International Shakespeare Association World Congress, Los Angeles, 1996*, ed. Jonathan Bate, Jill L. Levenson, and Dieter Mehl (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1998), p. 114. Jacobs goes on to claim that ‘[r]arely has such dark framing been so illuminating, emphasizing in many different ways the “darkness” associated with the Moor and his tragedy’ (p. 118).

<sup>68</sup> Truffaut, in *Orson Welles: A Critical View*, p. 17.

the most naïve knowledge of the play, Welles addresses his *Othello* to an audience whose familiarity with the plot, if not the text of the play, is assumed'.<sup>69</sup>

I would rather argue the opposite: that Welles, at ninety minutes, seeks to make this film available to a wider, specifically non-Shakespearean audience and, as a consummate, creative technician, to appeal not to the *cognoscenti* of Shakespeare, but to the *aficionados* of film. In contrast, by engaging fully with the text and with a theatrical situation, Olivier, at one hundred-and-seventy minutes, appeals to the more committed Shakespearean, to the theatre-goers who wanted the experience available on screen. An inherent nod towards popularity is contained with Welles's textual demolition, visual dynamism and, not least, his interpolated prologue which refers in simplistic terms to the coming Manichean struggle between a system and an outsider.

Welles's *Othello* is without doubt one of the busiest films in the Shakespearean canon, with text heaped upon text as jarred angles, Escher-like repetitions and captivating columns all superimposing meaning onto the screenplay. Kenneth Rothwell thinks *Othello* so contemporary to us that Welles 'invented the MTV style', while with its re-release in 1992,<sup>70</sup> the film became 'the poster child for the chaotic nineties'.<sup>71</sup> John Collick, by contrast, considers that this film of

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<sup>69</sup> *Filming Shakespeare's Plays*, p. 102. It is worth recalling that Welles played Othello for two months in 1951 at the St. James Theatre in London, under Laurence Olivier's direction. Welles gave an 'impressive but unexciting Othello', one who 'smoulders' without the 'expected flame', which disappointed the reviewer, who had 'expected from it the excitement we have known in the past. Although he came to the role as 'great black bull of a man with the eyes of a boy' (so clearly his masking had not rendered his facial subtleties beyond the recognition of this reviewer), he managed to give 'no more direct expression of passion than is within the compass of competent realistic acting, and he sees not more than one or two of the great speeches as opportunities for vocal music'. See *The Times*, 19 October, 1951; p. 8; Issue 52136; col E.

<sup>70</sup> A number of articles circulated at the time of the film's re-release in 1992, the following of which I found helpful: Brooke Comer, 'Restoring the Dusky Moor: Welles' Othello', in *American Cinematographer* 73 (1992): 66-8; Gary Crowds, 'Othello', in *Cineaste* 21 (1995): 52; Barbara Cramer, 'The Restored Othello', in *Films in Review* 43 (1992): 256-8; David Impastato, 'Orson Welles' Othello and the Welles-Smith Restoration: Definitive Version?' in *Shakespeare Bulletin* 10 (1992): 38-41; Philip Kemp, 'Perplexed in the Extreme', in *Sight and Sound* 2 (1992): 31; Philip Kemp and J. Rosenbaum, 'Improving Welles: Restoration Of The Film, Othello', in *Sight And Sound* 2 (1992): 28-30. In a chapter entitled 'The Texts of Othello', Michael Anderegg concentrates on evaluating the six (or so) film versions of Welles's *Othello* that have come down to us. En route, he details textual emendations in the first act of Welles's movie. See *Orson Welles, Shakespeare, and Popular Culture*, pp. 98-123.

<sup>71</sup> *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television*, pp. 78-9. Rothwell's time with Welles includes a fine précis of Welles's early work on Shakespeare and film (pp. 73-4). I cannot quite see Welles's *Othello* ever having the impact of Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's*

*Othello* was more relevant to its own time, and made ‘on the periphery of a movement that was fundamentally intellectual’. The prevalent fascist politics of Europe had given birth to an artistic proto-existentialism: ‘Symbolism, Expressionist theatre and the cinemas it was aligned to, attempted to reconcile the individual with society on a much more personal level’.<sup>72</sup> So we see how the film appeals to both contemporary and historic political contexts. In its time, the film’s racial dimension was mirrored throughout Europe; today, it is possible to patch together Welles’s *mise-en-scène* commentaries on race to give retroactive credibility to his political commitments.

Welles’s politically-driven, empathetic Moor ‘found [his] context in a Cold War atmosphere of paranoia and xenophobia, on the one hand, and, on the other... a powerful drive for Americans of African descent to achieve legal, social, and cultural parity in a deeply racist society’.<sup>73</sup> Yet critics still talk about the film’s ‘displacement of race’ and its ‘refusal of the text’s racial contrasts’, which is ‘disabling’.<sup>74</sup> We shall see how Welles could draw upon his fascist/racist antipathies to support the black cause by promoting a studied, intelligent African whose passions slowly succumb to a full-scale, colonising invasion.

One continued lament is that Welles so under-fuelled his Moor as to remove the illusion of greatness; that his steady, calm (and spiralling) introspection promotes an incongruous, subdued *text* while his violent, jagged, visual tapestries create an unstable *texture*. Joseph McBride warns that ‘Welles’s *Othello* might invite our derision, so anaesthetized he seems next to the clear-willed Iago, but Welles will not allow us to see anything but tragic nobility behind his actions’.<sup>75</sup> A traditional sense of nobility permeates his *Othello*’s assisted suicide, as if a stiff upper lip will get the African through: ‘Welles plays *Othello* as a truly noble man, great even in defeat – a conception world’s away from F.R. Leavis’s deflating “modern” view’.<sup>76</sup> Jonathan Rosenbaum writes of the ‘near somnambulism of

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*Romeo + Juliet*, but at least with the frenzied splicing and cross-cutting, Welles palpably anticipates the modern attention-span.

<sup>72</sup> *Shakespeare, cinema and society*, p. 63.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>74</sup> Peter Donaldson, *Shakespearean Films/Shakespearean Directors*, p. 119.

<sup>75</sup> *Orson Welles* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972), p. 119.

<sup>76</sup> *Shakespeare on Film* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1991), p. 189.

Welles's underplayed performance',<sup>77</sup> and Jack Jorgens of the emotional minimalism that means the roles are not just underplayed, but are 'seldom detailed and personal, lacking the sub-textual dimension'.<sup>78</sup> Jorgens is another to play compare and contrast with Olivier, *à propos* the muted senses of the Moor: 'Unlike Olivier, Welles avoids the big gestures and makes sparing use of his magnificent deep voice... [he] speaks in muted tones, and holds himself to a narrow emotional range', while 'his passion takes the form of sudden movements among grates and pillars, slamming of gates and doors, unexpected appearances of his shadow'.<sup>79</sup>

Can this anomaly of the big man playing small, a James Quin for the twentieth-century, find an answer not within epistemological enquiry but within solid, practical nous? We find an answer, I believe, in the words of Micheál MacLiammóir, our Iago, whose insights into the inherent differences between theatre- and film-acting alert us to an irreparable rupture in an actor's methodology. The thoughts are those of a first-time film actor, an intelligent man of the theatre whose comments are valid precisely *because of* his lack of experience in front of a camera. The diary entry for 19 June, 1949 reads as follows: 'Find what I have long suspected: (a) that one's first job is to forget every single lesson one ever learned on the stage: all projection of personality, build-up of a speech, and sustaining for more than a few seconds of an emotion are not only unnecessary but superfluous, and (b) that the ability to express oneself just below the rate of normal behaviour is a primal necessity'.<sup>80</sup> Off-screen, MacLiammóir records his primal belief that no first folio-based Shakespeare can be transferred to his incumbent medium:

Only thing that depresses me is the camera's inability – or unwillingness – to cope with the great organ-stop speeches, the 'Othello's occupation's gone' one, for example, which he delivers so far with caution as if afraid of shattering the sound-track. I feel at this apparently inevitable hush-hush... a return of all my old conviction that Shakespeare, had he written for the screen, would have done his work differently; this feeling accompanied by a longing to see Orson... stand up on an honest wooden stage and let us have the stuff from the wild lungs and in the manner intended.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> *Placing Movies*, p. 128.

<sup>78</sup> *Shakespeare on Film*, p. 185.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>80</sup> *Put Money in thy Purse*, p. 96.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

While it is fulfilling to see an Iago at odds with his boss while the cameras sleep, MacLiammóir reminds us of the constraints of the conscious camera and, implicitly, of the difference between Olivier's stage-driven *Othello*, which we will see contains wild declamation and gesture, and Welles's more sombre, reserved, screen-contained Moor. Shakespeare wrote his characters to be the essence of theatrical representation, to be above life, assertive in gesture, magniloquent in motive. Before a camera, though, actors must reckon with a form of consolidation, for 'the performer must mediate between their pull towards the visual and Shakespeare's pull towards the verbal, a tug of war'.<sup>82</sup> Fundamentally, this involves a reining in of the passions.

What is lost in this poetry of the screen is the subtlety of the actor, of his ability to pre-empt expectation and to manipulate the camera. What the film actor loses is the ability to move. It is rare in film to see the whole body in motion.<sup>83</sup> Anything less than a long shot will not display 'head to toe'. Little passion can pour forth from the body of a film actor, whereas a man who treads the boards will contort himself in order to connote. This might also go a long way to support the argument that '[o]f the blackface film Othellos, Orson Welles is the most resistant to stereotype and the most at ease with the camera and the role'.<sup>84</sup> Which, I should point out, is not to say that the film ignores race, just that Welles considers its presentation with more care than his fellow appropriators.

One of the great proponents of the *négritude* movement, which will accompany Olivier in Chapter IV, argues analogously to MacLiammóir of the primacy of determining emotions in a less immediate, more considered sense: 'emotion is the seizure of the whole being, consciousness and body, by the indeterminate world. It is an irruption of the mystical or magical world into the

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<sup>82</sup> Gregg Andrew Hurwitz, 'Transforming text: Iago's infection in Welles' *Othello*', in *Word & Image* 13 (1997): 334.

<sup>83</sup> The film-, and more particularly the television-, actor will often struggle to move convincingly on stage. The televisual tends constantly to crop actors into close-up; movement is rarely necessary. This lack is betrayed on stage though.

<sup>84</sup> Neil Taylor, 'National and racial stereotypes in Shakespeare films', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 270.

world of determinism... The African is moved less by the sign than its sense'.<sup>85</sup> With more feeling for the spread of his character, and averse to calling upon sharp, visual bursts of irrationality, Welles comes to cite Senghor's prose in pictures that depend upon overall sense rather than individual sign. The screen is, after all, saturated with signs. Welles's charisma works the length of the movie to realise a sensitive African, more concerned with understanding sense than exposing individual signs. The fact that Welles possessed humanitarian depths alongside a rare intelligence argues in favour of my main theme in this chapter: that Welles did not play down or shy away from race *per se*, but that he provided it in allegiance to a political commitment to equality and to the camera's unique aptitude and promptness for visualising his personal, humanising *credo*. In spite of their differences in opinion of how best to canvas for Shakespeare, MacLiammóir would surely have agreed that 'a Welles adaptation of Shakespeare is not an *ad hoc* project but the result of a lifetime of scholarship and creative experiment'.<sup>86</sup>

This said, I am not going to argue that Welles pulled a rabbit out of every hat. Suzanne Cloutier's submissive/catatonic Desdemona seems blanched beyond even the stereotype of a white fear of black sexuality.<sup>87</sup> Welles creates more racial commentary by combining their shadows on a wall than he does in showing their faces. When Welles speaks of Desdemona's near-dominance of the Moor's mind he can only be referring to the text, for there is little evidence in the film to support such a positivistic partner:

I think he must feel something close to awe, in his love of Desdemona, the Senator's daughter, who fled from the palace in the dead of night, to marry a black man. Black Othello, the outsider, the mercenary, the foreigner, and the older man, must feel a certain insecurity when he contemplates this curious

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<sup>85</sup> Léopold Sédar Senghor, 'Emotion' [1962], in *Prose and Poetry*, tr. John Reed and Clive Wake (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1976), p. 34.

<sup>86</sup> McBride, p. 108.

<sup>87</sup> In '*Othello*': a contextual history, Virginia Mason Vaughan concurs with Peter Donaldson's 'down-raced' Othello thesis. Her critique eschews a devoted racial focus and instead, 'centers squarely on the female body as the camera functions as a patriarchal eye' (p. 200). Carol Chillington Rutter likewise thinks that Desdemona is 'an icon, frequently immobile, nearly speechless, the emblematic "white" against which male psychotic activity – this film's real subject – is darkly displayed'. See 'Looking at Shakespeare's women on film', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 254.

conquest of his. He had married her, as if by a miracle, but can he keep her? Might she not turn away from him as suddenly as she ran away with him?<sup>88</sup>

I would rather hope that the issue might be resolved through a psychoanalysis of Welles's need to dominate women, and not through his way of empathising with the black community. The white/black power swap would in any case be at odds with Welles's commitment to the equalisation of the races that comes to inform my own observations.<sup>89</sup>

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Now we have a clearer idea of the type(s) of film Welles made, I would like to explore precisely how he promotes his racialisation of Shakespeare's text. For the purposes of my enquiry, the catalysts are fourfold: Welles's success derives from empowering Iago with 'impotence' and the run of the screen with which to define it; from an ideologic commitment to *chiaroscuro*, the cleaving of black and white, through which 'conflict and interpenetration... are stressed';<sup>90</sup> from subtle alignments of image and text which inscribe and expose racial differentiation; and from Welles's own belief in creating a specifically cinematic Shakespeare, beholden to the strictures of the frame yet liberated by cross-cutting and depth of field, by the range of architectures at his disposal.<sup>91</sup> What transpires is a resounding racialisation, an Othello who changes colour as the film progresses, a Moor for all

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<sup>88</sup> *Filming Othello*, dir. Orson Welles (Germany, 1978). I came across this transcript via Welles.net, the oracle of all things Xanadu. Citations Taken from <http://film.tierranet.com/directors/o.wells/fothelloe.html>, pp. 1-13, this from p. 10. Courtesy of Laurence French.

<sup>89</sup> Throughout the drawn-out filming process, Cloutier had as her constant companion-in-hand a black-faced, rag-doll called Louis (*Put Money in the Purse*, p. 144). What MacLiammóir misses is the symbolic qualities attached to Cloutier's stuffed conceit: an apt metaphor for the play's treatment of the Moor – a black figure to be tossed around as if by children.

<sup>90</sup> Jorgens, *Shakespeare on Film*, pp. 182-3.

<sup>91</sup> 'In *Othello* I felt that I had to choose between filming the play or continuing my own line of experimentation in adapting Shakespeare quite freely to the cinema form... *Othello* the movie, I hope, is first and foremost a motion picture'. Cited in Lorne M. Buchman, 'Orson Welles's "Othello": A Study of Time in Shakespeare's Tragedy', in *Shakespeare Survey* 39 (1987): 54. Buchman's article reveals Iago's manifest control of time in Welles's film, concentrating on the four key moments in which 'Welles shoots the empty hanging cage, reminding the audience of how Iago will eventually be punished in time' (65).

seasons, whose failure to confront and control his articulate adversary fuels this tragedy.

Micheál MacLiammóir's Iago is a coloniser while Othello remains a slave. The former is the play's fascistic voice and film's fascistic vision, determined to undermine the latter's implacable bearing, willed only to disrupt and conquer freedom of thought. Iago is a Venetian who hates the outsider, the North African, the Negro, the Moor. He is Godless among believers, an atheist who kidnaps sanctity. Iago reduces Othello firstly to a state of linguistic animality, to 'goats and monkeys',<sup>92</sup> thereafter to its physical analogue. Both Aimé Césaire and Jean-Paul Sartre (whom I will call upon in more detail when working with Olivier in the 1960s) understood the essentiality of debasement to the power structures of colonialism: '[t]he colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as *an animal*, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform *himself* into an animal'.<sup>93</sup> Just as Iago cages, so Welles will have him caged.

It is only through repeated viewings of *Othello* that one sees how influenced Welles is by the animalistic in man. In conjunction with both handwritten and typed instructions given to George Fanto, we see how the American used to his advantage the Moroccan menagerie. A 'Note for Montage' reads 'Horse being shod in foreground. Donkeys [sic] feet in foreground. Moving crowd in foreground. Goats. Window full of laughing girls. Screaming camel. Braying donkey. Horse rearing'.<sup>94</sup> Elsewhere, Welles would have 'Othello and Iago moving through large flock [sic] of goats';<sup>95</sup> and, keen to show the bestial in Iago, 'With sudden jerk Iago is dragged into scene from R. The chain is attached to spiked collar like dog's collar on neck'.<sup>96</sup> With the decision to cage and winch Iago, it becomes possible to discern how Welles's anger against racism transfers to the screen: 'In a people's world', he wrote, 'the incurable racist has no rights. He must be deprived of influence in a

<sup>92</sup> 3.3.406, repeated by the Moor at 4.1.263. As we have seen, both monkeys and goats are synonymous with stereotyped black sexuality.

<sup>93</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, tr. Joan Pinkham (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1972), p. 20.

<sup>94</sup> *Production Notes: Notes for Montage*, in The Fanto mss., Box 1, Folder 5.

<sup>95</sup> *Shooting/camera instructions*, in The Fanto mss., Box 1, Folder 5, p. 20.

<sup>96</sup> *Shooting/camera instructions (Mogador)*, in The Fanto mss., Box 1, Folder 5, p. 14.

people's government. He must be segregated as he himself would segregate the colored and semitic peoples – as we now segregate the leprous and insane'.<sup>97</sup> We should recall here that in revealing Iago's punishment, Welles stands alone among *Othello*'s filmmakers. Iago's silence is manifest in the text; his delivery from society is not. One might argue that Welles's uplifting visualisation supplants the narrative vortex that awaits Iago, and thereby acts as a forceful deterrent against bigotry.

Welles saw Iago as a man acting upon negative impulses so as to divide and conquer, to project his *impotence* onto a warrior, an inherent paradox.<sup>98</sup> Even as Iago manipulates and subjugates the highest levels of the Venetian establishment, so he must respond to his powerlessness, to his inverted, nullifying, psychic disposition. Although Gregg Andrew Hurwitz clearly shares my relish for MacLiammóir's Iago, I remain unconvinced that 'we are presented with Coleridge's Iago': in other words that 'Iago is not self-reflective; he is evil because that is what he is. No explanation is given, none necessary'.<sup>99</sup> MacLiammóir's Iago is not, *in sé*, evil; he is evil because he is impotent, because implicitly he lacks the power to become good; it is as if Iago must suck everything in, yet not breathe out. Whether explanation is necessary or not, the director gives it to us. MacLiammóir's is a man of moral and spiritual impotence threatened by goodness, by virtue, and by strangers who possess both. The Irishman detailed his methodology for us: 'No single trace of the Mephistophelean Iago to be used: no conscious villainy; a common man, clever as a waggonload of monkeys, his thought never on the present

<sup>97</sup> *Race Hate Must Be Outlawed*, in The Welles mss., 'Speeches and Writings, 1938-1948', Box 5, Folder 9, p. 6.

<sup>98</sup> "'Impotent', [Welles] roared in (surely somewhat forced) rich bass baritone, "that's why he hates life so much – they always do," continued he (voice by this time way down in boots)'. The manner of expressing this filmic desire, demanding impotence of MacLiammóir, a gay man, through the depths of an incomparably deep voice, suggests that Welles may have considered an impotent Iago specifically in conjunction with MacLiammóir: 'Worked alone together [sic] on jealousy scene all the rest of the day and was reassured by O. about my peculiar suitability for Iago' (*Put Money in thy Purse*, p. 26). It is worth recalling that MacLiammóir's long-term partner, Hilton Edwards, the film's Brabantio, was for years in some sublime awe of Welles's prodigious talents after the sixteen year-old's work with the couple at the Gate Theatre, Dublin, in 1931. Simon Callow thinks Edwards may have been in love with Welles, but that 'if Hilton had betrayed so much as a flicker of interest in the boy – whether emotional or sexual – Micheál would certainly have moved in on him with the speed and venom of a black mamba'. See *The Road to Xanadu*, p. 98.

<sup>99</sup> 'Transforming text: Iago's infection in Welles' *Othello*: 335.

moment but always on the move after the move after next... the honest honest [sic] Iago reputation is accepted because it has become almost the truth'.<sup>100</sup>

The results were validated by *The Times*'s cinema reviewer, who asserted that 'this is an interesting Iago, a man who neither stresses, nor rationalizes, nor troubles over-much to disguise his villainy – evil pours naturally out of him, a dog running loose'.<sup>101</sup> He is indeed. This animal is everywhere: On Othello's 'Impudent strumpet!' (4.2.82), the camera inexplicably cuts to Iago, who is overseeing the success of events from above, a one-time angel destined for a fall. The camera finds him instead of he it. He writhes across screen, an incessant mover and shaker, the antithesis of the ordered funeral that has opened the film. That he will be elevated above all at the conclusion confirms that he has been a moral overseer. But in the cage his fluidity will be gone. Constricted by an iron manifestation of his impotence, held still, pushed in oppressively, Iago has an eight-day (or so) wait for death. He has become 'a fixed figure for the time of scorn / To point his slow unmoving finger at' (4.2.55-6). Surely claustrophobia will kill this dervish before hunger or the birds get to him? But as a free spirit, he is irrepressible, his head often appearing directly behind his dupe, Roderigo, a kind of blind-siding that will affect others during the film.<sup>102</sup> He is the devil on the shoulder, the dark conscience with no counter-weighted virtue.<sup>103</sup> His visual dominance, whether he stands materially before us or lurking as a shadow, is total: 'In many regards, Iago *is* the film; his shadows take over the entire movie and determine the dramatic action... [his] world completely possesses Othello, turning him into the opposite of his former self, a mere shadow of the imposing soldier who first stepped foot on the shores of Cyprus'.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>100</sup> *Put Money in Thy Purse*, p. 27.

<sup>101</sup> *The Times*, 27 February, 1956: 5.

<sup>102</sup> As a siren of Welles's screen, Iago often attracts us from a deep-focus distance. In order to earn his dram, Michael Cassio must descend the length of the ramp from an extreme long shot to a medium close-up, looking all the time at his captor. He comes down as we stand directly behind Iago, an over-the-shoulder two shot tracks his inevitable approach; it is, after all, downhill all the way when mingling with this ensign.

<sup>103</sup> MacLiammóir's creeping odium is accompanied on a *spinetta* whose jarring, unreliable syncopations fracture silence and prove perfect in setting down the pegs of malice.

<sup>104</sup> Hurwitz, 'Transforming text: Iago's infection in Welles' *Othello*': 338.

To recall the ceaseless motion that defines a static centre of power is to return to Susan Sontag. That this dynamism should belong to Iago and passivity to his boss is Welles's way of evidencing the extraordinary colonisation/submission of the Moor's mind through movement as much as through lighting. Jack Jorgens takes note of this symbiotic relationship: '[I]f the film's grandeur, hyperbole, and simplicity are the Moor's, its dizzying perspectives and camera movements, tortured compositions, grotesque shadows, and insane distortions are Iago's, for he is the agent of chaos'.<sup>105</sup>

Welles's instruments of chaos are the bars that fill the screen: 'Iago encloses Othello in the web of his persuasion, restricting Othello's moral judgment until he is entrapped in the tomb of his own misperceptions'.<sup>106</sup> Hoisted by his own *petard*! is the immediate reaction to Iago's fate in the cage, as our agent of chaos finds chaos's end high above the ramparts. His early promise to take Desdemona and 'Turn her virtue into pitch and out of her own goodness make the net that shall enmesh them all' (2.3.355-7), took place as Iago walked beneath the cage which was suspended, Damoclean, directly above his head. Wherever we look, Cyprus is a prison, Iago the gaoler. Amid the Baroque criss-crossings of the orientalisised architecture, the brooding beat returns, underplayed, throbbing, as unyielding as the bars that surround the island physically and its chief inhabitant mentally. Even Desdemona wears a snood in her hair, which warns of the penalties attached to desire and supplements the riddled layers of dark and light that stymie the Moor's mind. Michael Anderegg, in addressing the film's intersecting planes and stark monochromatics, offers a curious response to the high contrast of lighting at Welles's disposal:

It might be objected that the juxtaposition of black and white is inevitable in any film shot in black and white, but this is only superficially true. As we watch most black-and-white films, we tend to forget this limitation of the colour spectrum, to 'fill in' colors ourselves. In *Othello*, Welles...emphasises, time and again, the sharp contrast between areas of light and areas of

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<sup>105</sup> Jorgens, *Shakespeare on Film*, p. 177.

<sup>106</sup> 'Transforming text: Iago's infection in Welles' *Othello*: 333.

darkness; the film is filled with shadows, with darkness engulfing light, and with illumination emerging, or thrusting itself out of the void.<sup>107</sup>

What black and white allows for is a frigidity of representation, without the excitable sentimentalities of colour. If the audience is wondering what colour things really are, then the filmmaker has failed, frankly. Welles much preferred to shoot in black and white: 'color, you know, is a great friend in need to the cameraman but it's an enemy of the actor. Faces in color tend to look like meat – veal, beef, baloney... [Makeup] makes it worse. Only hope is no makeup'.<sup>108</sup> Welles confirmed that his technique was deliberate, a visual layering of black and white over and above mere 'black and white',<sup>109</sup> and I cannot stress enough the subtlety with which he combines black and white, through a progression of low- to high-contrasts, from 'broad outdoor lighting to enclosed chiaroscuro and silhouette through the primary line of the action, from the arrival in Cyprus to the murder of Desdemona'.<sup>110</sup> In looking at a number of *mises-en-scène*, from the opening funeral to the Doge's Palace, from the privacy of bedchambers to the spatially liberated walk before the waves, we see how Welles's uniquely imagistic use of dark and light 'goes beyond the obvious in making light/dark imagery a pervading and in no way simplistic concept',<sup>111</sup> and comes fully to distantiate Othello both physically and morally.

Welles as *Auteur* also uses lighting to individuate characters. I am thinking of the fair Desdemona, and how her blanched porcelain features are ripe for all shadows. Jack Jorgens refers to her 'opaque whiteness serv[ing] to heighten the ugly labyrinths Iago has revealed in Othello';<sup>112</sup> Naremore calls Desdemona 'a fair Botticellian girl'.<sup>113</sup> From people to various places, Welles's use of sunlight and

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<sup>107</sup> Orson Welles, *Shakespeare and Popular Culture*, pp. 104-5. Welles filmed *The Chimes at Midnight* in black and white although, by 1966, colour was the norm. This allowed for a symbolic frigidity in the relationship between Hal and Falstaff.

<sup>108</sup> *This is Orson Welles*, p. 250. Welles, who lost weight to play Falstaff, tends often towards the culinary metaphor.

<sup>109</sup> 'I don't think anything that you see in a picture of mine is *unconscious*'. *This is Orson Welles*, p. 235.

<sup>110</sup> Davies, *Filming Shakespeare's Plays*, p. 109.

<sup>111</sup> Anderegg, *Orson Welles, Shakespeare and Popular Culture*, p. 105.

<sup>112</sup> *Shakespeare on Film*, p. 187.

<sup>113</sup> *The Magic World of Orson Welles*, p. 214. Naremore here extends the artistic Renaissance flavour that Welles sought to capture. Welles's muse was not Botticelli, a Florentine, but Carpaccio, a Venetian. As far as one can periodise Welles's *Othello*, we can relate Carpaccio's Venetian art of the 1490s, with its own strict linearity, formalistic perspective and use of mirrors, or mirrored realities.

shadow, of lighted, pure faces and tenebrous lurkings, succeeds in separating not just good from evil, but also the outsider from the regimentation of Venice. As Othello translocates, so he is held captive amid the arbitrariness and relative imprecision of his Cypriot experience. Anthony Davies notes that '[t]he film's gradual shift to dark interiors is a spatial articulation of Othello's change from heroic simplicity to the sullen anguish of uncharted introspection'.<sup>114</sup> Much of this spatial enslavement is down to the hyperactive Iago, whose work, as the film opens, is already done.

The first opportunity to produce race through *mise-en-scène* comes as a curtain of light parts over Othello's lifeless face. Black yields to white, 'as though [Othello] were at the bottom of a dark well of isolation'.<sup>115</sup> The Moor is upside-down, the inverted world stressing 'the unnatural reversal of the moral order in the life of Venice';<sup>116</sup> instantly the colour dialectic is created, black yields to white, which will be reversed at the conclusion. The POV shot will also repeat at the end of the film: it is we who will look down on the top-lighted Moor, through the rotunda's oculus, a clandestine mode of gross gaping that announces the voyeur in Iago and his audience.<sup>117</sup> The ensuing, Christian funeral takes place in silhouette, the procession acting as a choreographed overture at a moribund pace, joining us in the end before the beginning.<sup>118</sup>

The metronomic beat that precedes the funeral begins. It will find its true rhythm in the footsteps of the pallbearers, themselves robed according to the schematics of the film: black for Othello, white for Desdemona. The specific dynamism returns us to Sontag's abhorrence of fascistic performance, 'the

Roderigo's Tenerife, 'Riquette, a *soi-disant* lap-dog of repellent aspect' (*Put Money in Thy Purse*, p. 106), speaks to Carpaccio's love of the breed and calls straight to mind Iago's 'drown cats and blind puppies' (1.3.336-7), which is exactly what happens to his master, Othello, the blind puppy.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>115</sup> Davies, *Filming Shakespeare's Plays*, p. 111.

<sup>116</sup> *A History of Shakespeare on Screen*, p. 81.

<sup>117</sup> Likewise, during Cassio's pursuit of Roderigo in the sewers, the 'cistern for foul toads / To knot and gender in!' (4.2.62-3), the soldiers above gather to spectate via an oculus, which prefigures the voyeuristic spectacle of death at the film's end. Welles then cuts to a view of Othello leaving his bed, disturbed by the commotion. Again, the POV is from above, high-camera, an all-seeing eye which constantly calls out to the ocular proof that Othello never finds. The scene was shot at the Portuguese castle at Safi, Morocco.

<sup>118</sup> As with *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *The Trial* (1963), Welles was never one to keep secrets about his protagonists' fate; it is the journey, not the arrival, that spurs Welles.

rendering of movement in grandiose and rigid patterns', for such choreography, she continues, 'rehearses the very unity of the polity. The masses are made to take form, be design'.<sup>119</sup> Othello is borne a level above his murdered wife, whose body is covered with black gauze, a racialised rejoinder to the white gauze within which she will come to be strangled.

Against this moribund yet precise flow is dragged Iago, haltered like a dog, destined for the cage within which he will be food for 'daws to peck at' (1.1.64). Even to his punishment, Iago continues to disrupt all that is sacred. The cross held aloft at the head of the procession finds its mirror image in the bars of the cage, a conflation of sin and Dantesque punishment.<sup>120</sup> Once within, Iago is hauled aloft, and we see his face in close-up. It is not a remorseful face, but one with an anodyne inquisitiveness at events below; long-evacuated of morality Iago stands, desiccating. For the first time, we come to see life through his eyes, a POV shot establishing his view of the funeral between the bars. We are in the cage with him, guilty, punished. The camera then drops beneath this stage and into a world of darkness below ground that signals the beginning of this infernal tragedy. Welles's voice-over, an interpolated contextualisation, ushers us back in time and place to Venice. Within the first five minutes, the state-sanctioned rituals of death and punishment play out formally; as black and white combine to impose order on the scene, so Iago commences with Welles's text, as if we need constantly to be reminded, 'I have told thee often and I tell thee again, and again' (1.3.365-6).

As Othello obeys the midnight summons and marches to the extra-ordinary counsel at the Doge's palace, the camera looks up to him from a sheer, low angle, his stature towering, his physical dominance outlined. Yet there remains the nagging feeling that the camera has been given Hell's point of view. It is only during Brabantio's tirade against his daughter that we see the Moor's face in close up for the first time. As she has 'run from her father to the sooty bosom of such a thing as thou' (1.2.70-1), so 'thou' is revealed, Welles coming from right of camera

<sup>119</sup> *Under the Sign of Saturn*, p. 92.

<sup>120</sup> The bars of the cage also neatly divide Iago's face for us, splitting his personality, reminding us that this man is not what he is.

into a three-quarter shot, against a white wall, turbaned like the Turk he once smote, bearded, his sootiness there for Venice to see.

He opens as a repressed Moor, overwhelmed by this extempore convocation. He walks in and out of shadow, by turns blackened and whitened, as he reveals to the rapt, white Venice the adventures of his warrior past, coming to rest with his face lighted as he pours out the truth of the matrimony and of his wooing. He is whitened by light when talking about her, as if to deny the miscegeny that has gone before.<sup>121</sup> Othello's speech to the senate, lest we forget, is a life saver. One false step and he will be condemned to death. The measured rhetoric should be seen in the light of the threat against him as he pronounces upon the background to his motives. Welles is balanced and calm, while the camera foregrounds the faces of the oligarchy, held in group portrait, conveying a weight of static opposition.

Intimacy between Othello and his new wife is also mediated by shadow, by visible reminders of their different skin-tones. On her wedding night, a submissive, whitened Desdemona is seen through a gauze. As the Moor lowers himself onto his bride, all set to 'obey the time' (1.3.301), the camera fades to black out, which highlights the smothering process, while withdrawing us from a display of black sexuality.<sup>122</sup> But not for long; the potential re-appears immediately in Cyprus, where a second bed scene is juxta-posed with the revels taking place outside. Othello looks straight to camera and closes the door on us. We are not welcome. This is no spectacle. In life, voyeurs are not invited, which does not mean they will not come. While Othello pointedly closes the door on any exhibition of black sexuality, Welles's camera refuses its master's bidding, taking us instead into the bedchamber to hear 'If it were now to die, / T'were now to be most happy' (2.1.187-8). The bed is foregrounded. The monochrome shadows of Othello and his bride come together on the wall, connubially. He throws his arm around her, and

<sup>121</sup> The balance that Welles creates between black and white is supplemented by costuming. Othello often wears a white robe, which off-sets the colour of his face. Iago wears black, which makes his face look snow white. Desdemona wears white, new bride that she is, although on the bier her face is covered by a black veil.

<sup>122</sup> Admittedly, the dark cannon firing stiffly into the Cypriot sea could be seen in reference to the Moor's sexual potency.

two shadows become one, black, immense. What was convenient – because doubles were inevitably used – proves propitious.<sup>123</sup>

As I have already said, this Othello literally changes colour as the film progresses. Although Peter Cowie notes that 'Othello's features appear sculpted in the gloom as he accuses Desdemona more and more violently',<sup>124</sup> a more pliable material is at work, for shadow and lighting often come visibly to blacken Othello as he speaks. On a line such as his exasperated dismissal of a pleading Desdemona (3.4.95), his face is thrown into shadow. From Act Three onwards, where restraint yields to excitability, the now tempted Moor, to which process I will return, is never darker, it seems, than when most wrathful. Launching into 'Damn her, lewd minx: O, damn her!' (3.3.478) his face darkens again, as Iago looks up to the crumbling statue of the Virgin and Child and crosses himself.<sup>125</sup> He too succumbs to this ornate face-painting, as a means of placing racial divergence on top of the text. At 'Patience... your mind perhaps may change' (3.3.455), MacLiammóir, in close-up, walks into a shadow that rises slowly over his face, pictorialising the change of mind from light to dark thoughts.

In this way, Welles subtly compensates for his decision, say, to excise the 'thicklips' epithet (1.1.65). He finesses racial difference diversely, beyond text, by combinations of text, image, lighting, and sound that speak a thousand lines themselves. Michael Cassio's 'for there be souls must be saved' is a prime example: Cassio's face begins front-lighted, white will be saved. He then stands, delivering 'and there be souls must not be saved' (2.3.98-100), while moving his face up into shadow. On the line 'no offence to the general nor any man of quality, I hope to be saved' (2.3.102-3), his face is fully blackened, obscured, the inescapable

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<sup>123</sup> Othello's absence from the screen fails to stem encroaching blackness. Amid the coterie of Emilia, Desdemona and Iago, Michael Cassio, otherwise gushingly blond, the more obvious Aryan match for Desdemona, appears only as a shadow on the wall to answer her question 'what's the news with you?' (3.4.110). Desdemona too is overcome by shadow, 'an allotropic property' (Davies, *Filming Shakespeare's Plays*, p. 112). Her conversation with Emilia at 4.2 has Emilia's shadow come between them, which imposes upon the scene the sense of psychic blackness that pervades the film, with or without the Moor.

<sup>124</sup> Peter Cowie, *The Cinema of Orson Welles* (South Brunswick and New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1973), p. 126.

<sup>125</sup> A moment's delicious hypocrisy.

implication that black faces will not be saved (not in this play at least), and that black skin is bound to be roasted in sulphur.

These coalescences of text and colouring complement Welles's canny combinations of text and image, which highlight both Shakespearean and Wellesian racial discourse. Welles uses textual implication to reveal Iago's racist loathing for the Moor. The earliest of Iago's linguistic metamorphoses – the rendering of language unto the animal forms which will signify Othello's complete submission – with his debasing 'ere I would say I would drown myself for the love of a guinea-hen I would change my humanity with a baboon' (1.3.315-7) – is shared with Roderigo on the bank of the canal. As soon as spoken, a discordant blast of clarinet directs the camera to a high-angle shot down on to the heads of Othello and Desdemona, who slip away on a gondolier, she facing the camera, lighted in white, he, likely using a double, robed in Moorish garb, dark and complex. This congress is as much a fusion of lighting as of souls, but one whose harmony is already overpowered by the simian referencing of the Moor, a classic domination trope whose efficacy was noted by Sartre of the French army, who 'have been given orders to reduce the inhabitants of the annexed territory to the level of a superior monkey to justify the colon's treating them as beasts of burden. Colonial violence does not only aim to keep these enslaved peoples at a respectful distance, it also seeks to dehumanize them'.<sup>126</sup>

The apogee of the coloniser's power, the renowned temptation scene at 3.3, becomes the visual axis on which the plot turns. Welles produces 'perhaps the most famous shot of the film',<sup>127</sup> a fluid (and almost unheard of) eighty-second tracking shot; with Iago to the left of him, camera to the right of him, and beyond, a crashing sea, the two-shot stroll on the ramparts captures Othello and Iago in medium long-shot, in constant motion. The walk along the ramparts is remarkable for the linearity

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<sup>126</sup> 'Preface to the Wretched of the Earth', in *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*, tr. Azzedine Haddour, Steve Brewer and Terry McWilliams (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 142. Also worthy of comment is the sudden cut to two blind, Muslim devotees intoning the greatness of God, *Allahu Akbar*. The blindness and religiosity of the moment is filled with meaning, not least a reminder of the Moor's previous faith gone awry (or perhaps a proposal that all faith is blind) and of Othello's blind faith in Iago. There is also Roderigo in the steam bath who executes by hanging what appears to be his soap: the dope with the soap on the rope anticipates Iago's pendulous end.

<sup>127</sup> 'Transforming text: Iago's infection in Welles' *Othello*', p. 337.

of the take: what is natural and restless is the backdrop to the subversion which otherwise takes place with calm progression. Overall, we witness an intensely personal experience in which the Moor's mutable nature is represented by the jagged tide, for Welles's deep focus gives life to the angry waves, while Iago's success is measured by his constant, gliding, uninterrupted destruction of Othello's mind. The dualism, like those hued symbioses, splits the screen in a physical, *mise-en-scène* revelation of Iago as carrier of the coloniser's schizophrenic self.

Again, seen as a whole, the temptation scene is also the moment of colonisation, the transfer of language, the supplanting of authority. Just as Iago had earlier colonised Cassio's language by feeding him wine,<sup>128</sup> so Iago steals the Moor's tongue, confounding him with intonation. MacLiammóir toys with the words 'think' and 'honest' as if Iago, thought, and honesty had only just met. The conquering is traced from left to right. As the shot proceeds, Iago hardly moves his eyes, and then only to look directly at the Moor. The shot completes. He faces Othello. We are directly behind the Moor's head, looking at the ensign. The same position as Iago himself appears in many a shot. We ape the ensign. We are the devil on the Moor's shoulder: 'Good name in man and woman, dear my lord...' (3.3.158), he commences. Othello responds straight to camera, his face half lighted black, half white. From us/Iago he demands a confession: 'By heaven, I'll know thy thoughts!' (3.3.164). The pacing is superb, unhurried, dramatically convincing; Iago is dry, constricted by his own power-sapping bars. We begin to see how his tactics will gnaw at the intelligence of the Moor.

As the temptation moves within, to the armoury, where Iago is literally disarming (or un-canning)<sup>129</sup> his master in the imposing cellars, Welles again lines up the imagistic with the textual, a means of superimposing racial meaning beyond any textual understanding. 'Look to your wife, observe her well with Cassio' (3.3.200), says Iago, peeling off the Moor's amulets and breast-plate. '[H]er father...he thought t'was witchcraft' (3.3.213-4). The camera cuts to a close-up reaction shot of a disapproving Othello, aware of the significance of the accusation.

<sup>128</sup> 'I...Drunk? and speak parrot? and squabble? swagger? swear?' (2.3.273-5).

<sup>129</sup> The armour was put together from sardine cans.

As his anguish mounts, Othello looks straight into the mirror, behind which, once again, is Iago. We see the Moor's reflection, a closely cropped face held in place. We also see Iago looking straight at the Moor. Which way will he go? Which reflection will he accept as his own, his own black face, or Iago's? This is another moment of transference between the pair. As with Iago's and Othello's concluding coalescence between the bars, when their faces will seemingly merge, so again the dichotomies of power and impotence combine pictorially, through the reflected face.<sup>130</sup>

The cropping is repeated in the listening scene. Othello is obscured, as if hidden in a hole in the wall. Only his face is visible (and distant), recalling the beginning and end of the film. Spatially, the Moor is boxed in, his head circumscribed by Iago, the colonisation complete. Significantly, it is the screams of gulls that distort the distant words, for Othello has been well and truly gulled. His fit takes place in total darkness, the darkest time for Othello. And then cacophonous voices begin their perverse *coloratura*, in a kind of psychic *Carmina Burana*. The vertiginous camera swirls around him, a personification of Iago's untrammelled access to his distorted mind; 'Lie with her? lie on her?' (4.1.35). Othello recovers, looking up at the gulls. The world is upside-down, as it will forever remain.

*Othello* is a dizzying spectacle. Welles shuffles Shakespeare, not worried about a full pack, only focussed on a winning hand. The level of racial discourse that the director shares with us is remarkable for a ninety-minute telling of the play. Notwithstanding his sedentary, deliberate Moor, Welles still manages to give us the fullness of the African warrior, a man who undergoes several shades of change, who must contend with lappings and overlappings amid increasingly narrow spaces.<sup>131</sup> His death is almost tangential. Othello backs into a crevice, forgets the

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<sup>130</sup> Similarly, Buchowetski uses 'doubling' to bring Othello and Iago together. The pair stands in long shot outside the sleeping Desdemona's chamber. Jannings is screen left, facing the camera, all in black. Krauss stands next to him, his back to us, all in white, as Moorish Yin meets Deutsche Yang. We will see considerable use of this technique as we proceed. Just before Jannings kills himself, he and Michael Cassio embrace, their faces close together, sharing empathy in tragedy with a charged moment's homoeroticism as they hold this cosy, conjunctive pose. Cassio looks closely at the Moor's mouth. They do not kiss, but do everything *but* kiss, and thus is Cassio forgiven for all he has not done.

<sup>131</sup> The Russian Sergei Yutkevich filmed *Othello* just three years after Welles (USSR, MosFilm, 1955). Given its non-Western perspective, I have chosen not to include a full analysis of this

turban'd Turk altogether, stabs himself meekly and staggers to the bed, unimpressed, dying. The grandstanding finale has already lost out to the funeral scene; the denouement, by which critics are apt to address the racialisation of Othello, has little impact. Darkness can only fall again. But Welles had already claimed the humanitarian ground for his Moor, a free-spirited creation, distanced from cliché by a superior, considered and multivalent presentation.

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fascinating film in my thesis. While there is much to compare in the two movies, the Russian director proposed them to be diametrically opposed: 'We viewed the play from completely different directions, and our whole approach to its adaptation was different... Mine is an adaptation of Shakespeare's play, while Welles's is a series of variations on a theme of Shakespeare. But more fundamentally, there is the almost symbolic difference between our prologues... I start from life, while Welles starts from death' (*The Times*, 18 November, 1960). Nonetheless, the Wellesian aura carries over to the Russian in several key respects: Yutkevich, as did Welles, shrinks spatiality into severely cropped sequences, a powerful containment of evil's cause and effect. For most of the movie, for example, Irina Skobzeva's Desdemona has her head covered by something approaching a bead *yarmulke* which recalls Suzanne Cloutier's significant snood. The temptation scene takes place among fishing nets on a beach. This now recognisable symbol of enclosure ensures that Sergei Bondarchuk's Othello struggles to progress through the meshes. Both A. Popov's Iago and Othello use the reflective possibilities of a well, a form of aperture around which Welles assembled voyeurs. Fine camera work tricks us into thinking that we are under water, looking up at the ensign in a low-angle close-up as he determines to enmesh all and sundry. In fact we see his reflection; he dips his hand into the still water which has the effect of disguising his face as well as symbolising the turbulence that is coming our way. The two films also conjoin in success: where Welles's *Othello* won Cannes's *Grand Prix* in 1952, Yutkevich's *Othello* won the 'Best Director' award at the same festival in 1956.

**Chapter IV**  
**'Thin habits and poor likelihood of modern seeming':**  
**Laurence Olivier and the Swamping of Body and State**

By 1964, and the ritual of making up for Othello, [Olivier] could titter about his tackle: 'What a tragedy that such a very great actor should have such a very small cock', he'd sigh, as he proceeded to create the illusion he was black.<sup>1</sup>

The average length of the penis among the black men of Africa, Dr. Palès says, rarely exceeds 120 millimeters (4.6244 inches). Testut, in his *Traité d'anatomie humaine*, offers the same figure for the European. But these are facts that persuade no one. The white man is convinced that the Negro is a beast.<sup>2</sup>

The white, western fear of the size of the black penis, uncorroborated, yet passed into lore at homes, in schools and workplaces the white-world over, was an exterior symptom of blackness clearly integral to Laurence Olivier's mindset at the time of his stage and film performances of *Othello* for the National Theatre in 1964-65.

That Olivier (1907-89) should feel somehow incapable of fully effective mimesis due to his 'lack' is undoubtedly an indication of his commitment to the role. Yet the fact that, as Dr. Palès confirms, he need not have been overly concerned, is contra-indicative of how detached Olivier's essentialist methodology was from the day's diverse and burgeoning conceptions of blackness, now increasingly available not only through the treatise but through the experiential. The 1960s was *the* twentieth-century decade of black immigration to the United Kingdom, a coalescence of races which forced an erstwhile ignorant, white populous to accept the Other into its own home, albeit with far-reaching and politically divisive consequences. What I would like to do here is to lay out the decidedly frosty climate that awaited Olivier's Moor, to introduce a number of contemporaneous<sup>3</sup> critics of the British accommodation of the West Indian diaspora, and to test, through Olivier's performance, and against the time, how viable was his belief in 'moments when I think I am Othello, when I am convinced I am black'.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Roger Lewis, *The Real Life of Laurence Olivier* (London: Arrow Books, 1997), p. 114.

<sup>2</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 170.

<sup>3</sup> Instead of hindsight, it therefore becomes possible to centre this chapter very much on the time of its contents.

<sup>4</sup> *On Acting* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 158.

How, I would like to ask, does Olivier's Moor approach these emerging paradigms of oppressed Otherness? Does he serve them with an inner faithfulness, with a conscientiousness appropriate to those immigrants whose ideological plight Olivier claimed to mirror, or did he merely abuse his target subjects with a skin-deep fetish?<sup>5</sup>

Aside from his own interest in Dr. Palès's unusual work, what Frantz Fanon's *oeuvre* gives us, in the voice of the black man speaking to both oppressor and oppressed is, in many ways, a 'how not to represent', his overarching lament being that black humanity remains 'overdetermined from without'.<sup>6</sup> The Martiniquan also asks us to render intelligible such a diasporic moment as confronted by Olivier in specific terms, 'in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content'.<sup>7</sup> The way we see Othello and the identity of this displaced, noble Moor continues to sway *mutatis mutandis*, which immediately denies any sense of fixity while also, paradoxically, creating new space for the old tropes of blackness to reappear. To Homi Bhabha, these time-bound interceptions occur 'at the point at which something exceeds the frame of the image, it eludes the eye, evacuates the self as a site of identity and autonomy and – most important – leaves a resistant trace, a stain of the subject, a sign of resistance'.<sup>8</sup>

The 1960s had a surplus of form and content regarding blackness which Olivier was to assail; likewise, director John Dexter's Shakespearean production was also very much a product of the 1960s in its richness of subtext and its emphasis on characters' socio-economic positioning... Olivier and Dexter between them may have wished to show his audiences exactly what it was they resented in black men (arrogance? sexual potency? mere difference?),

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<sup>5</sup> Anne McClintock provides a useful etymology of this most pertinent word: 'The term *fetish* derives from the medieval Portuguese word *feitiço*, which meant sorcery of magical arts... By the fifteenth century, Portuguese explorers trading along the west coast of Africa used the term *feitiço* to describe the mysterious amulets and ritual objects favoured by the African peoples they encountered on their voyages... In 1760, a French *Philosophe*, Charles de Broses, coined the term *fetichisme* as the term for "primitive religion". In 1867, Marx took the term *commodity fetishism* and the idea of primitive magic to express the central social form of the modern industrial economy. In 1905, Freud transferred the term *fetish* to the realm of sexuality and the domain of erotic perversions'. See *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 181-2, 185-6.

<sup>6</sup> *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 116.

<sup>7</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, tr. Constance Farrington (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 27.

<sup>8</sup> *The Location of Culture*, pp. 49-50. We should prepare for a literalisation of the staining of the subject.

and then win them to sympathise with such a man in spite of themselves. Even so, only the atmosphere of the early 1960s made such a performance possible.<sup>9</sup>

In point of fact, Olivier's stage *Othello*, originally conceived to celebrate Shakespeare's quatercentenary,<sup>10</sup> announced itself in the midst of a spectacular racial polemic, in an 'atmosphere' uncannily reminiscent of Elizabeth I's desire to purge her realm of 'Negars and Blackamoors', which I discussed in Chapter I. Anthony Davies reminds us that 'one of the perceived intentions behind [the] production (which is the substance from which the film selects its images) was to stress the contemporary social relevance of *Othello* as a black man in an established white society, and to base the precariousness of his self-image in large measure upon that'.<sup>11</sup> Ostensibly, Olivier appeared to have 'found an artistically valid notion of how the role should be interpreted...and found the courage to set it forth. He makes the play more engrossing – and more convincing – than it has ever been for a modern audience'.<sup>12</sup> The fragility of the immigrant's white-created identity was Olivier's target. Alan Seymour's review of Dexter's production, distasteful and provocative to the modern reader though it may be, successfully contextualises the intent for the ensuing film of the production:

The conception may be dismissed as dated, tasteless, and monstrous with artistic, social and political offensiveness. Persons hypersensitive to racial prejudice could make the charge that this eye-rolling, pink-lipped, tongue-thrusting coal-black Pappy is a demonstration of the most rearguard white

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<sup>9</sup> Lois Potter, *Shakespeare in Performance: Othello* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 148, 153. Where Olivier himself speaks, he tends to speak of the play, not the film. However, 'The producer[s]... ultimate intention was to screen it on pay-TV, and it bears all the hallmarks of having been tailored for TV'. See Constance Brown, 'Othello', in *Film Quarterly* 19 (1966): 49.

<sup>10</sup> *Othello* opened in London at the Old Vic on 21 April, 1964. During the same National Theatre season two other plays of racial subjugation – bookends on the colonial timeline – debuted on the London stage: Peter Shaffer's *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, a dramatic exposition of Spanish pangs for Incan gold/domination, and a magnificent allegory of a society's psychological implosion when forced to yield a Jew to the invading 'Blacks', Max Frisch's *Andorra*. Since the National Theatre's inception, only two other *Othellos* have felt its boards beneath their feet, bare or not: Peter Hall's *Othello* opened at the Olivier on 20 March, 1980, with Paul Schofield in the title role. Sam Mendes' co-production with the Salzburg Festival opened at the Cottesloe on 18 September, 1997, thereafter moving to the Lyttleton on 1 May, 1998. David Harewood played the Moor, Simon Russel Beale his ensign. I saw this magnificent production in New York City in 1998.

<sup>11</sup> 'Filming *Othello*', in *Shakespeare and the Moving Image: The Plays on Film and Television*, eds. Anthony Davies and Stanley Welles (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 196.

<sup>12</sup> *Newsweek*, cited in Douglas Brode, *Shakespeare in the Movies: From the Silent Era to Shakespeare in Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 164.

man's concept of the 'primitive' Negro. Persons who like their Shakespeare 'poetic' and uncontaminated by any contact with sordid reality could well be appalled by the prosaic rendering of the Moor as a cheeky nigger who has sauntered in from Westbourne Park Road. Such persons would have an element of rightness on their side. Their wrongness would consist of not recognising unbounded magnificence when they see it.<sup>13</sup>

Evidently, it was right to be appalled, but wrong to shoot the esteemed messenger. Those 'cheeky niggers' in Notting Hill accounted for much of the political turbulence of the times. By the time Olivier came to don his now infamous mask, the UK-based, white fear of black invasion had re-surfaced, directly responsive to the British government's policy of accommodating its former subjugates.

In performance, this actor's positioning of the black body as a tool of oppressive white misconception attaches itself, as we will see, to Fanonian resistance and its cultural corollary, in the form of the Negritude movement, both of which were under active promulgation as the Moor took to the boards. In brief, this movement 'set as its initial goal a renewed awareness of being black, the acceptance of one's destiny, history, and culture, as well as a sense of responsibility toward the past'.<sup>14</sup> While I do not intend to submerge us in the philosophy of a movement of which Olivier had likely not heard at this time, Negritude nonetheless yields up crucial intersections between Shakespeare and the souls of 60's black folk which tend to garble Olivier's announced conviction that his colour change had been successfully internalised.

Olivier himself was not shy of a tome or two about his colour change, and I will charge my critique of his racialisation by highlighting his off-stage commentaries on the change from white to black, on what it meant to the country's

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<sup>13</sup> Alan Seymour, 'A View from the Stalls by Alan Seymour', in *Othello: The National Theatre Production*, ed. Kenneth Tynan (New York: Stein and Day, 1966), p. 13. It should go without saying that his entry into the white world is viewed quite differently by black interpreters of Shakespeare: 'When Africans see themselves represented in the figure of Shakespeare's Othello... they quite understandably resist the dichotomy of "civilization" and "barbarism" in terms of which Othello is judged... [r]ecognizing that even in sympathetic readings, such essentialist categories demonize the black races and occlude the material conditions of their struggle'. See Jyotsna Singh, 'Othello's Identity, Postcolonial Theory, and Contemporary African Rewritings of Othello', in *Women, 'Race,' and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, eds. Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 293.

<sup>14</sup> Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith, 'Introduction', *Aimé Césaire, The Collected Poetry*, tr. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 6.

greatest classical actor, at the age of 58, to put on a black mask in order to hide beneath a white one. We know that Olivier did not choose the role on a whim: 'I've put it off because I think it's pretty well unplayable. It's a terrible study and a monstrous, monstrous burden for the actor. I think Shakespeare and actor Richard Burbage got together one night and Burbage said, "I can play anything you write, anything at all." And Shakespeare said, "Right, I'll fix you boy!" And then he wrote *Othello*'.<sup>15</sup>

What we learn is that Olivier was responding to a four-hundred-year-old challenge, one to which he, over and above even Richard Burbage, was uniquely fitted to respond. His geographical focus was clearly Britain, London more precisely – given the capital's obvious economic centrality – but not Shakespeare's Venice. Olivier's migrant man-of-war fights and dies for an England whose ideology is bound to epochal immigration restrictions and with a clear Caribbean ingress in mind. And in this new home-from-home, he is under the eye of an implicitly racist, reactionary Centre, for Olivier saw *Othello* not as facing doddering Italian senators but the British political establishment, in the election year of 1964, a year in which notorious racial bigotry struck repeatedly at the heart of Westminster. A brief summary of how such a crisis came to pass will help me to ground Olivier's choice.

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Traditionally, the USA was the welcoming haven for West Indian immigrants, there being allotted, until the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act, up to 65,000 new entries per year. Through an artful distinction between British and Caribbean citizens, the American legislature successfully slashed these numbers to approximately 800 per year. It had become the turn of the Mother-country to nurture its children as West Indians had to look East for their employment opportunities. Peter Fryer counts 125,000 West Indian immigrants arriving in the United Kingdom between 1948-58,

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<sup>15</sup> Olivier, cited in John Cottrell, *Laurence Olivier*, pp. 352-3.

while Sheila Patterson further estimates 238,200 West Indian newcomers to the UK between 1952-61.<sup>16</sup>

In tandem with this increase came a socio-political desire for decrease. There was no famine in the realm this time, but racial tensions were already high as a result of recession arising from the 1956 Suez crisis: immigrants, as is their sad wont, were blamed for white unemployment. Race riots in London and Nottingham ensued and towards the end of the 1950s, the Tories threatened to close Britain's borders to black newcomers. Unsurprisingly, this stimulated a rush to settle. By 1962, the immigrant population had risen to 300,000. A new, empowered minority, came to establish the fact of blackness. Inarguably, these numbers promoted the kind of backlash, bound unto its time, which Fanon could seize upon with customary stellar ardour:

There are... certain constellations in the framework of precise geographical areas, which at a given moment have undergone a direct and sudden assault of different cultural patterns. The technical, generally advanced development of the social group that has thus appeared enables it to set up an organised domination. The enterprise of deculturation turns out to be the negative of a more gigantic work of economic, and even biological enslavement.<sup>17</sup>

For every action, a reactionary. In 1962, the sitting Conservative government yielded to pressure from within its own ranks and presented to Parliament the Commonwealth Immigrants' Bill which aimed to restrict entry into the country to Commonwealth settlers issued with employment vouchers. This institutionalised downscaling officially equated black skin with second-class citizenship, 'with the status of undesirable immigrant'.<sup>18</sup> A. Sivanandan defines the shift in the government's approach, away from welcome towards disdain: 'Racialism was no longer a matter of free enterprise; it was nationalised. If labour from the "coloured" Commonwealth and colonies was still needed, its intake and deployment was going

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<sup>16</sup> *Staying Power*, p. 372; *Dark Strangers: A Study of West Indians in London* (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 359.

<sup>17</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Towards the African Revolution: Political Essays*, p. 31.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 374.

to be regulated not by the market forces of discrimination but by the regulatory instruments of the state itself'.<sup>19</sup>

In August 1965, Harold Wilson's Labour Government presented to Parliament a White Paper on Immigration from the Commonwealth which 'accepted, indeed assumed, that the essence of the problem was numbers... No more than 8,500 employment vouchers a year would henceforth be issued – and these, as it turned out, were largely restricted to skilled workers and professional people'.<sup>20</sup> It is as well to remember that although the numbers game only applies to Othello in as much as he stood alone of all his tribe, every integration into the mainstream of this professional soldier stimulates, as we know, powerful instantiations of colour blending and their consequent racial codings. Dilip Hiro writes that two categories of West Indian immigrant 'pioneered the trail to Britain': those already familiar with Britain by virtue of service in WWII, and 'those professionals and skilled workers who, being well-informed about the manpower needs of post-war Britain, were willing to migrate in order to earn more money and to find a social niche in a society which had moulded their thinking and attitudes'.<sup>21</sup> Olivier's Othello, revered mercenary and skilled social-climber, came to claim his place, in 1964, in the latter sub-set.

In 1966 there were created the National Committee for Commonwealth Immigrants, headed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Race Relations Board. Their purpose was to work towards conciliation and equality for minorities by outlawing incitement to racial hatred; but to those same minorities, the reality of this supposedly palliative legislation was less laudable: 'To ordinary blacks, these structures were irrelevant: liaison and conciliation seemed to define them as a people apart who somehow needed to be fitted into the mainstream of British society – when all they were seeking were the same rights as other citizens'.<sup>22</sup> Sheila Patterson, writing in 1965, reminds us of the pointlessness of such rights in

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<sup>19</sup> 'From Rebellion to Resistance', in *A Different Hunger: Writings on Black Resistance* (London: Pluto Press, 1982), p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> *Staying Power*, p. 383.

<sup>21</sup> Dilip Hiro, *Black British, White British* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 7. Hiro's compelling case-studies document the combined experiences of West Indian and Indian immigrants to the U.K. in the mid-sixties.

<sup>22</sup> A. Sivanandan, *A Different Hunger*, p. 17.

the face of preconceived notions of black skin that awaited new settlers: 'Coloured skin, especially when combined with Negroid features, is associated with alienness and with the lowest social status. Primitiveness, savagery, violence, sexuality, general lack of control, sloth, irresponsibility – all these are part of the image'.<sup>23</sup> All of which, save sloth – far from it – are perceptually present within the character of Othello. Shakespeare's prescience foresaw stasis in more than three-and-a-half centuries of racial cognisance. 1965, as we see, was sociologically analogous to 1595:

More than two-thirds of Britain's white population, in fact, held a low opinion of black people or disapproved of them. They saw them as heathens who practiced head-hunting, cannibalism, infanticide, polygamy, and 'black magic'. They saw them as uncivilized, backward people, inherently inferior to Europeans, living in primitive mud huts 'in the bush', wearing few clothes... and suffering from unpleasant diseases. They saw them as ignorant and illiterate, speaking strange languages, and lacking proper education. They believed that black men had stronger sexual urges than white men, were less inhibited, and could give greater satisfaction to their sexual partners.<sup>24</sup>

If this scurrilous litany was the white expectation, how, I must ask, did Laurence Olivier intend to attack such seemingly indestructible psychic predispositions? Or was it his assumption, in his earnest effort to walk like a panther, to make of himself 'a blue-black velvet Negro with a hip-rolling swagger that lapses, with his descent to the bestial, into a slinking crouch',<sup>25</sup> that the essential rang true? In other words, was Olivier to seek an heterogeneous, ambivalent racial register or to create one to vindicate mythologies whose application fused historicity with contemporaneity?

Supplementary to the unstable racial climate was the National Theatre's provocative decision to preview *Othello* for a week in Birmingham's Alex Theatre, some five miles away from Smethwick, part of Birmingham's urban conurbation, and a political constituency then busy cementing its name in British racial history. During the 1964 General Election, the Conservative candidate for Smethwick, Peter

<sup>23</sup> Sheila Patterson, *Dark Strangers: A Study of West Indians in London*, p. 212.

<sup>24</sup> Peter Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 374. An outgrowth of these primitive white beliefs was the formation in February 1967 of the fascist National Front, a year before Enoch Powell's infamous 'rivers of blood' speech was delivered at Birmingham.

<sup>25</sup> Constance Brown, 'Othello', in *Film Quarterly* 19 (1966): 50.

Griffiths, came to endorse the extraordinary slogan 'If you want a nigger neighbour, vote Labour'.<sup>26</sup> Although the incoming Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, called Griffiths 'a parliamentary leper', the weight of public paranoia was enough to secure for him the seat.<sup>27</sup> For the first time in post-war British politics, what we have come to call the race-card was slapped down face-up.<sup>28</sup> In the same month that Martin Luther King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, bigotry was promoted and circulated within the British political establishment. And here was Olivier's Moor, nothing if not a 'nigger neighbour', surrounded by tenements full of hatred, part of the influx of blacks once desired by the government now detested by great swathes of the electorate.

It is not my concern here to mirror the myriad critics who have accused Olivier of blatant, personative racism, although I will introduce a number of their thoughts so as to evidence my position that Olivier, the representational researcher *par excellence*, did not merely get the wrong end of the black stick, but the wrong black stick altogether. As a consequence of his own film, Orson Welles drew

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<sup>26</sup> Paul Foot's influential *Immigration and Race in British Politics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) provides a superb breakdown of this breakdown. He proposes the following theory for the events which culminated in Birmingham:

Coloured immigrants... are symbols to the British not only of strangeness but of failure. Throughout industrial history the British workers have been comforted with the grandeur of their imperial destiny. Their anger and bitterness at unemployment, illiteracy and poverty were assiduously drugged with stories of conquest in foreign lands. The subjects of this conquest were coloured. All great men, they were led to believe, were white men, and all uncivilized, weak, backward peoples were black. The long grisly process of imperialism was inextricably intertwined with colour. Political independence for the colonial countries was cruel enough for those imaginations nourished on their country's singular glory, and the stream of former subjects into the Mother Country as equals before the law and the Welfare State was a final insult. (pp. 231-232)

<sup>27</sup> Cited in Peter Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 383. The Smethwick by-election took place on 15 October, 1964. Nationwide, Labour ousted the Tories on a 3.5 percent swing, but in Smethwick, Griffiths won a 7.2 percent swing to defeat Patrick Gordon Walker, a member of Labour's shadow cabinet. As a result, Walker was kicked upstairs to the House of Lords, briefly becoming Harold Wilson's foreign secretary.

<sup>28</sup> 'Asked to comment on television, Mr. Wilson replied: "I think that's an utterly squalid and degrading thing for any Englishman... to say. It was said, in fact, I understand, by the Conservative candidate in the Smethwick division... where they are, I think, degrading politics to about the lowest level I've known in my lifetime"'. See A.W. Singham, 'Immigration and the Election', in D.E. Butler and Anthony King, *The British General Election of 1964* (London: Macmillan, 1965), p. 361. Singham estimates that by 1964 'the immigrant population [in Britain] probably numbered about 800,000, of whom about half were West Indians and about 265,000 Indians and Pakistanis' (p. 360). He also points out that 'a July [1964] Gallup poll showed 20% of people wanting a total ban on immigration, 40% in favour of unilaterally imposed controls, and 28% in favour of controls imposed by negotiation; only 10% favoured free entry' (p. 362).

nowhere near the same opprobrium; strange for an American, for he, while underplaying the physicality of his Moor, was no less intertwined with the politics of separation, foregrounded in the USA as much as in Britain.<sup>29</sup>

Preparatorily, Olivier placed great reliance on the literary criticism of F.R. Leavis, whose near-monomaniacal methodology resounded fully until the fracturing of theoretical disciplinarianism in the 1970s.<sup>30</sup> The good doctor's (in)famous essay on *Othello*, 'Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero: or, the sentimentalist's *Othello*',<sup>31</sup> pored over by Olivier with the play's director, John Dexter, forcefully opined 'that a flaw of self-dramatized egotism and conceit in *Othello* contributed to his downfall: the notion that the Moor is kidding himself as well as those around him in the narcissistic picture of himself as a noble hero of great dignity and sophistication, a black emperor among the whites whom he serves'.<sup>32</sup>

The vexed dialectic for Leavis in 1962 lay not so much in Iago's 'diabolic intellect' as in 'Othello's readiness to respond'. In Leavis's reality, the black man

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<sup>29</sup> The 1960s was a decade for very confused racial politics on either side of the Atlantic (and indeed beyond), the years 1964-66 being central to voices of repression and resistance. On 13 April, 1964, Sidney Poitier became the first black to win the Oscar for best actor, for his role in *Lilies of the Field*. In South Africa, Nelson Mandela was sentenced to life imprisonment for treason on 14 June, 1964. US President Lyndon Johnson signed into law in July, 1964 the 'Civil Rights Act', which proscribed racial discrimination in federally-funded agencies and public facilities and created an Equal Employment Opportunities Commission. In October of the same year, the Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to Jean-Paul Sartre, who famously resisted the temptation to accept it, proclaiming that such institutionalisation would dilute the impact of his work. On 21 February, 1965, Malcolm X was shot dead at the Audubon Ballroom in New York City, at the age of 39. Dr. Hendrik Verwoerd, father of Apartheid, and newly-elected Prime Minister of South Africa, was stabbed to death on 6 September, 1966, just seven minutes after taking his seat in the House of Assembly. And on 8 November, 1966, Edward Brooke became the first black US senator since direct senatorial elections were instituted in 1911. Also worthy of mention here is the 1965 publication of Jan Kott's influential 'The Two Paradoxes of *Othello*', in *Shakespeare our Contemporary*, tr. Boleslaw Taborski (London: Methuen, 1983), pp. 79-99.

<sup>30</sup> Terry Eagleton compellingly summarises the rise of Leavis and the 'companion', transatlantic American New Criticism in *Literary Theories: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983). See particularly pp. 30-51.

<sup>31</sup> In *The Common Pursuit* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), pp. 136-59. Leavis wrote as if serving a blood vendetta upon the long-deceased A.C. Bradley, whose 'sustained and sanctioned perversity' worked to justify external causality for the Moor's downfall (p.138). Bradley had rebutted on three counts Coleridge's famous 'motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity'. Firstly, Iago longs to satisfy his sense of power; secondly, his addiction to the 'intensely exciting' pleasure arising from actions 'difficult and perilous'; thirdly, that Iago is 'compelled, by his success in convincing Othello, to advance to conclusions of which at the outset he [Iago] did not dream'. See *Shakespearean Tragedy* [1904] (London: Macmillan, 1966), pp. 188-9.

<sup>32</sup> Cottrell, *Laurence Olivier*, pp. 354-5.

was solely culpable due to his ineffable 'pride, sensual possessiveness, appetite, love of loving... ferocious stupidity, [and] an insane and self-deceiving passion'.<sup>33</sup> All this rhetorical vehemence was available for the consumption of theatre-goers. Julie Hankey claims that the producers' decision to include Leavis's essay in the evening's programme 'thoroughly primed [the public] to expect a brutal egoist'.<sup>34</sup> Audiences – and they flocked –<sup>35</sup> were pre-warned that the Moor's undoing was contained within his lack of self-knowledge in tandem with the failure of his projected self image; a triumph of weak vanity over strength of character. 'This was', wrote Kenneth Tynan – he of Welles's 'Citizen Coon' – 'not a noble, "civilised" Othello, but a triumphant black despot, aflame with unadmitted self-regard':<sup>36</sup> a very un-British dismantling of the self in the face of exigency; no stiff, upper 'thick-lip' at work within this symbol of contemporary black success.

Where Sujata Iyengar argues that 'Olivier's Leavisite *Othello* is infuriating not even so much because of the grotesque make-up but because of its resolute assignation of consistent motive or a fatal flaw to Othello',<sup>37</sup> it is fair only to respond that it would hardly have been a Leavisite *Othello* without it. Yet there is complementarity here: in short, the blacker the look, the less eradicable the flaw. That 'sauntering nigger' from London, W.11 had already been determined theatrically, just as had been, in sociological terms, his 300,000 or so black British brethren.

Consequently, John Dexter, and latterly the film's director, Stuart Burge, came to see the idea of Othello 'as a man essentially narcissistic and self-dramatising'. The director went on to explain to his cast members that

Othello is a pompous, word-spinning black general... The important thing is not to accept him at his own valuation... He isn't just a righteous man who's

<sup>33</sup> 'Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero', pp. 140, 145-7.

<sup>34</sup> Julie Hankey, *Plays in Performance*, p. 109.

<sup>35</sup> 'In 1964, a ticket to [*Othello*] became the piece of paper most difficult to obtain in Britain. Lord Snowdon had to stand during a matinée. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., then one of President Kennedy's closest aides, failed to get in. Every day, *The Times* "agony column" carried advertisements begging for tickets at any price. The production became a kind of novel theatrical myth, the biggest Shakespeare box-office draw of modern times'. See John Cottrell, *Laurence Olivier*, pp. 358-9.

<sup>36</sup> 'Olivier: The Actor and the Moor', in *Othello: The National Theatre Production*, ed. Kenneth Tynan (New York: Stein and Day, 1966), p. 4.

<sup>37</sup> 'White Faces, Blackface: the Production of "Race" in *Othello*', in *Othello: New Critical Essays*, p. 116.

been wronged. He's a man too proud to think that he could ever be capable of anything as base as jealousy. When he learns that he can be jealous, his character changes: the knowledge destroys him, and he goes berserk.<sup>38</sup>

Not just any word-spinning general, but a black one too, which adjective implicitly changes the Dexter/Burge manner and mode of his representation. As we have seen, characterologically, Olivier's wish was to deconstruct the West Indian immigrant experience in line with the profound, psychic uncertainties of Leavis's model. We are fortunate that the be-knighted thespian was not shy of explaining his personal, Moorish mantle. He gifts the scholar with a trove of opinion upon his Moor's 'inner' self and upon the physicality with which Othello chose to demonstrate his essence to the world, be it Venetian, Brummy, or Londoner:

I had to be black. I had to feel black down to my soul. I had to look out from a black man's world... External characteristics are to me a shelter – a refuge from having nothing to feel, from finding yourself standing on the stage with just lines to say, without a helpful indication of how to treat them or how to move. I construct my portrait from the outside with little techniques, ideas, images – and once the portrait becomes real, it starts travelling inwards.<sup>39</sup>

I am forced to wonder whether Olivier shared this meticulousness when creating a 'white' role, whether he researched in such depth when paid to display his own natural skin; a point well made by critics of Aimé Césaire: 'the very distinction between "black" and "white", between prelogical and logical mentality betrayed an Occidental point of view: a black should not have to wonder how to be black, just as in Wolé Soyinka's famous quip, the tiger does not have to proclaim its tigrity'.<sup>40</sup> I think I can state without fear of contradiction that the fact of whiteness never even entered the Olivier head.

Timothy Murray, in a chapter on the film in his 1993 work on filmic ideology, rejects such a totalising racialisation; it is rather Olivier's contemporisation of the

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<sup>38</sup> Kenneth Tynan, 'Olivier: The Actor and the Moor', in *Othello: The National Theatre Production*, p. 4. To be fair, Dexter's view is not without corroboration among modern, black scholarship: 'Othello suffers from an overwhelming inferiority complex, which is seen as a part of his racial heritage, his lack of social refinement, the absence in him of the fine balance of reason and emotion that comes with true "education"'. See S.E. Ogude, 'Literature and Racism: The Example of Othello', in *Othello: New Essays by Black Writers*, p. 163.

<sup>39</sup> Cited in Donald Spoto, *Laurence Olivier: A Biography* (London: Fontana, 1992), p. 427.

<sup>40</sup> Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith, 'Introduction', *Aimé Césaire, The Collected Poetry*, p. 7.

role – the very stuff of this chapter – that ignites his theoretical interest: ‘Not truly wishing Othello to portray the historical differend of racial identities, Olivier acts out the cultural desire to efface difference through identity’.<sup>41</sup> This is a complex point, one which somehow denies the obvious in the search for the inconspicuous; cultural desire, as we are well aware, revolves around the instantaneity of a social and political *Zeitgeist*. Murray’s central claim is that ‘Olivier does more to maintain the cultural ideology of Negritude, which inscribes resistance in the web of colonial fantasy, than to expose it to any sustained performance or retrospective critique’.<sup>42</sup>

Actually, Olivier’s specific cultural desire was to confront an aggressively anti-immigration British *polis* with the arrival of a neighbourly Negro, abandoned at birth and now come to share economic opportunity with the British. There was also a kind of racial philanthropy to Olivier’s actions: ‘One of the innermost, and at the same time overtly conscious, determinations of my life has always been to make the modern generation understand what I am doing. I would have to put every single throb of my tiniest vein right into [Othello]. It was not a role of which I would be able to rid myself when I took off the makeup’.<sup>43</sup> For my money, Olivier’s modern generation must incorporate new West Indian settlers. He wanted to characterise the bus driver-cum-general, a problematic shift in itself, and one which jars with Roger Lewis’s contention that Olivier ‘wasn’t a modern man...his origins or the source of his strength are in the nineteenth century and...the scale of his acting is for the Victorian stage’.<sup>44</sup> Less subtle and more demonstrative than, like the earliest of filmed *Othellos*, as will be borne out in a number of takes as I deconstruct the film of the play.

What we can be sure of is the certainty and commitment with which Olivier’s portraiture was unveiled: ‘I had rejected the modern trend towards a pale coffee-coloured compromise, a natural aristocrat; this was, I felt, a cop-out, arising out of some feeling that the Moor could not be thought a truly noble Moor if he was too

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<sup>41</sup> *Like a Film: Ideological fantasy on screen, camera and canvas* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 112.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>43</sup> *On Acting*, p. 151.

<sup>44</sup> Roger Lewis, *The Real Life of Laurence Olivier*, p. 161. Lewis’s ‘scandalous’ exposé, despite its titillating promise, proves to be no more than an over-stuffed hagiography.

black and in too great a contrast to the noble whites: a shocking case of pure snobbery'.<sup>45</sup> This is laudable liberalism. But intended feeling is one thing, while its dramatic projection is quite another. 'Black as Black can be' was the only colour that interested Olivier. Donald Spoto's meticulous description of the actor's nightly masking aptly mirrors the *minutiae* of mental transformation intended by Olivier:

He shaved the hair from his chest, arms and legs, then applied Max Factor number 2280, a black liquid stain, over his entire body. When that had dried, a lighter brown was added, then a third coat to give a mahogany sheen. He and his dresser then used yards of chiffon to polish his skin until he shone (pancake powder would run under perspiration). Then he painted his fingernails with a pale-blue varnish, coated the inside of his mouth with gentian violet, put on a tightly curled black wig, and with a pinkish hue polished his palms and the soles of his feet; four hours later, after the performance, almost two hours were required to remove the make-up. This radically detailed surface was the extreme example of Olivier's external approach to a role – the bits and pieces of an appearance meticulously calculated and entirely controlled by him.<sup>46</sup>

All of which enabled 'those swaying hips so generously commented upon, and regarded as the keystone of an elaborate characterisation that even went to the lengths of studying the gait of the barefoot races!'.<sup>47</sup> A little too self-laudatory for my liking, but not so for John Russell Brown who was almost shaken to his boots by the artistry of the performance, which was 'supremely inventive, sustained and astonishing'. This well-known, polyvalent critic focused fully on the physical aspect of Olivier's Moorishness: 'In execution the most original element was Olivier's persistent sensuousness: a full-lipped make-up, cat-like walk, soft and low-pitched passages, caressing movements'.<sup>48</sup>

Other white critics of the day were no less impressed by Olivier's physical transformation: 'Sir Laurence has managed, by heaven knows what witchcraft, to capture the very essence of what it must mean to be born with a dark skin...It is a

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<sup>45</sup> *Confessions of an Actor*, p. 267.

<sup>46</sup> Donald Spoto, *Laurence Olivier: A Biography*, p. 428.

<sup>47</sup> *Confessions of an Actor*, p. 270.

<sup>48</sup> *Shakespeare's Plays in Performance* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), pp. 220-1. I must admit that Russell Brown's work nonetheless continues to impress. *New Sites for Shakespeare: Theatre, Audience and Asia* (London: Routledge, 1999), is both a tomely and timely reminder of the varieties of cultural interpretation. *Othello* receives barely a mention, but his work on *Hamlet*, *Lear*, and

performance full of grace, terror and insolence. I shall dream of its mysteries for years to come'.<sup>49</sup> Where Olivier's Othello will sneer at witchcraft, this critique calls upon a long mis-recognised trait of blackness, that of satanic dealings. One is left to wonder once again how effectively to capture the essence of what it must mean to be born with a white skin. But Olivier's assured self-descriptions continually called upon the physical, rarely the mental, which tends to controvert the process of inward travel that he had declared crucial to success:

I was beginning to know how I would look: very strong. He should stand as a strong man stands, with a sort of ease, straight-backed, straight-necked, relaxed as a lion. I was certain that he had to be very graceful. I was sure that when he killed in battle, he did it with absolute beauty. Black... I had to be black. I had to feel black down to my soul. I had to look out from a black man's world. Not one of repression, for Othello would have felt superior to the white man. If I peeled my skin, underneath would be another layer of black skin. I was to be beautiful. Quite beautiful.<sup>50</sup>

It seems harsh to reward such precision by asserting that Olivier's efforts made him look like no more than 'a Rastus or an end man in an American minstrel show';<sup>51</sup> which, *in sé*, is precisely the exposure of black skin that Orson Welles was anxious to avoid in his 'Voodoo' *Macbeth* some three decades earlier. Only Hollis Alpert, on my travels through this chapter, thought to question the presence of innate physical deficiency, notwithstanding that 'Rigorous integrity of artistic purpose was Olivier's aim, but there are those who are going to be made unhappy by what might seem an undue emphasis on racial characteristics, and the suggestion (is it Shakespeare's or Olivier's?) of a certain residual primitivism in Othello's psyche'.<sup>52</sup> That residual primitivism, its causation, its very existence, was to be assailed at this time by black artists too, with no less rigorous integrity. It is these to whom I now turn.

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*Macbeth* notably evidences discrete Asian interpretations, both performative and audience-based, of the major tragedies.

<sup>49</sup> Herbert Kretzner, *The Daily Express*, cited in Cottrell, p. 355.

<sup>50</sup> *On Acting*, p. 153.

<sup>51</sup> *The New York Times*, undated, cited in Peter Morris's *Shakespeare on Film* (Ottawa: Canadian Film Institute/Institut Canadien du film, 1972), p. 29.

<sup>52</sup> *Saturday Review*, undated, cited in Jerry Vermilye, *The Complete Films of Laurence Olivier* (New York: Citadel Press, 1992), p. 166.

Olivier proposed that his Moor should be an organic creation: '[s]ensuous. He should grow from the earth, the rich, brown earth, warmed by the sun... Barefoot... lithe, dignified and sensual. Lifting, yet positive'.<sup>53</sup> This much we know. But little has come down to us about Olivier's disposition towards acting the psychics of being black. In the face of Olivier's certitude, how then might I effectively critique Olivier's assurances of *his* black soul's quiddity? How then to offer an alternative to what it means to be black? Alongside his earnest wish to be a contemporary, fifty-eight year-old man seeking synchronicity with the 1960s immigrant experience through his stage and film interpretation, what can we learn of the purported fragility of the Moor's mind? What, on a larger scale, can be said of blackness by black intellectuals themselves engaged in searching to articulate both the damage inflicted by centuries of white domination and the positivistic, ingenuous part of being black that yet remained hidden behind nothing more than a colour?

In this connection, I would like briefly to look at proclamations of black resistance which arose after WWII, chiefly from the philosophical backlash to the French colonisation of Algeria and latterly from the urge faithfully to document the realities of the black soul through the Negritude movement, in which participation Aimé Césaire rewrote Shakespeare for a contemporary *Realpolitik*. The movement, as I have briefly explained, sought to reclaim a discreet mapping of black African values and culture, since, 'unlike the white proletariat, blacks were not fully integrated into the materialistic, objective Western world, the expressions of Negritude should blend objective elements (the tradition of the black race) with subjective ones (the essence of the black soul)',<sup>54</sup> while arguing that African progress can be brought to bear through the African's uniquely spiritual connectivity, through the 'sum total of the values of the civilization of the African world... It was the communal warmth, the image-symbol and the cosmic rhythm which instead of dividing and sterilizing, unified and made fertile'.<sup>55</sup> This came

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<sup>53</sup> *On Acting*, p. 155.

<sup>54</sup> Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith, 'Introduction', *Aimé Césaire, The Collected Poetry*, p. 7.

<sup>55</sup> Léopold Sédar Senghor, 'Negritude' [1962], in *Prose and Poetry*, tr. John Reed and Clive Wake (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1976), p. 99. I found the following publications useful in researching Negritude: Colette V. Michael, *Negritude: An Annotated Bibliography* (West Cornwall,

from the President of Senegal, in 1962. Was Mother Africa coming to the South Bank?

Negritude, in Césaire's words, was 'a resistance to the politics of assimilation', resistance to the idea of 'Frenchmen with black skin... a concrete rather than an abstract coming to consciousness'.<sup>56</sup> Was Othello, then, a Moor with white skin? This was what the white man, Olivier, had come to do for the black man, for the newly-arrived West Indian immigrant to the UK, to reveal to him the essence of his soul; or, in reality, to the white audience who would have their views seemingly confirmed.<sup>57</sup> But this did not seem to get through to the production's critics, who softened their accusations of dilettantism by instead lauding, as if mesmerized, the outside of the black white man:

[Y]ou can see the joins in the wigs, the runny make-up, the crinkles in the canvas backdrops... But Olivier transfigures the virtual amateurishness; we attend to his physical surfaces: the skin, the eyes, the movement, the command... In *Othello*, where we see the saliva, the pores of his skin clogged with greasepaint, the perspiration, it's not that we are as close as a theatre audience, it's more like being on stage with him... We look at his hands and wish to pinch him.<sup>58</sup>

It is not as if you might not get the same feel for any actor of any colour, in make-up and under studio lights, if truth be known. But blackness fascinated because whiteness was invisible. In his *A Tempest*, originally published in 1969 as

CT: Locust Hill Press, 1988); Julio Finn, *Voices of Negritude* (London: Quartet Books, 1988) (an anthology of Negritude poetry translated from the French, Portuguese and Spanish); and Barend Van Niekerk, *The African Image in the Work of Senghor* (A.A. Balkema: Cape Town, 1970).

<sup>56</sup> Aimé Césaire, 'An Interview', in *Discourse on Colonialism*, tr. Joan Pinkham (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1972), pp. 72-3.

<sup>57</sup> I found O. Mannoni's *Prospero and Caliban: the Psychology of Colonization*, tr. Pamela Powesland (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1956) unhelpful with regard to my enquiry. A major contention is that Mannoni disenfranchises Madagascan individuality, labouring under a Jungian reading of a pre-programmed, mythologically wrought, internal need to be colonized. Mannoni might well have entitled his work *The Psychology of Self-Colonization*. Césaire was no fan either: 'Don't let the subtleties of vocabulary, the new terminology, frighten you!... They take it, they dress it up for you, tangle it up for you. The result is Mannoni' (*Discourse on Colonialism*, p. 40). Philip Mason disconnects Shakespeare's exposition of racism from imperialist ideology, instead arguing for the presence of Jungian myth, and 'a readiness to personify the Shadow or the Id in some human or semi-human form, and an identification of darkness with evil'. See *Prospero's Magic: Some Thoughts on Race and Class* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 122. For an excellent psychoanalytic reading of Othello's metaphorical blackness, see Arthur L. Little Jr., "'An essence that's not seen": the primal scene of racism in Othello', in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 44 (1993): 304-24.

<sup>58</sup> Roger Lewis, *The Real Life of Laurence Olivier*, p. 202.

*Une Tempête*, Césaire, as will Jonathan Miller in Chapter V, re-casts Shakespeare's racial dynamics. Ariel is a mulatto, a half closer to Prospero's skin colour, a half further from Caliban's, who is fully 'a black slave'. This Prospero and Caliban are truly intertwined, appropriating Hegel's Master/Slave dialectic to accommodate their eventual inseparability. Ultimately, Caliban, subjugated and self-hating, responds to the battery of racial denigration let loose by his aggressive, imperial master: 'Prospero, you're a great magician: / You're an old hand at deception. / And you lied to me so much / About the world, about yourself, / That you ended up imposing on me / An image of myself: / Underdeveloped, in your words, incompetent, / That's how you made me see myself! / And I loathe that image... and it's false!'.<sup>59</sup> How easy it would be here to trade the name of Prospero for that of Iago, the final assertion and culmination of Othello's lamentable instance of self-recognition – 'Haply for I am black' (3.3.267) – resting precisely upon the terms of Caliban's epiphany.<sup>60</sup> Césaire's projections of Negritude come to serve *Othello* as well as Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, yet I enter a near-empty arena, for the theoretical concentration of Shakespearean racial subjugation falls firmly upon Caliban rather than the Moor.<sup>61</sup>

In *Return to my Native Land*, Césaire offers an alternative to Olivier's understanding of blackness, in which the black writer 'confronted the tradition by which Africans are disparaged or discountenanced as a race, playing between irony and validation, and recasting aspects of that tradition in a positive and affirmative manner'.<sup>62</sup> He does so with a forceful announcement of black physical heterogeneity: 'the definition of my biology, no longer miserably confined to a facial angle, to a type of hair, to a nose sufficiently flattened, to a pigmentation

<sup>59</sup> *A Tempest*, tr. Richard Miller (New York: Ubu Repertory Theatre Productions, 1985), pp. 71-2.

<sup>60</sup> Caliban memorably tells his master to 'fuck off... back to Europe' (p. 72). The slave pushes the master away. But Prospero cannot leave him – and thus concludes the play – for so much of Prospero's self-understanding is tied to his active mastery of the slave.

<sup>61</sup> Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan's *Shakespeare's Caliban: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) discusses Césaire's refraction through the Negritude movement of this slave's identity, dominated as it is by his master: 'To me, Prospero is the complete totalitarian. I am always surprised when others consider him the wise man who "forgives" ... Prospero is the man of cold reason, the man of methodical conquest – in other words a portrait of the "enlightened" European' (p. 162). This might equally refer to the Moor's ensign.

<sup>62</sup> Olu Oguibe, 'Footprints of a Mountaineer: Ugo Ezonu and the Black redefinition of Modernism', in *Black British Culture and Society: A Text Reader*, ed. Kwesi Owusu (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 501.

sufficiently melanose...negritude is no longer a cephalic index or a plasma or a soma; we are measured with the compass of suffering'.<sup>63</sup> Césaire here introduces the willed self-destruction of the black man as a result of his desire to be white. Philosophical resistance continued with the publication in 1963 of Fanon's *Présence Africaine*.<sup>64</sup> His intent was not merely to bring some philosophical order to these debilitating processes of colonization but to call-to-arms the repressed and unwilling participants in the colonial project.

Once again, similarities between the colonized and *Othello* are manifest, not least in the bloodthirsty *dénouement* that awaits the ambitious subjugee: 'The violence which has ruled over the ordering of the colonial world... will be claimed and taken over by the native at the moment when, deciding to embody history in his own person, he surges into the forbidden quarters'.<sup>65</sup> Those quarters can either be read as Othello's white pearl, Desdemona, or to the white man's economic heartland into which a black presence was asserting a basic human right. Olivier's black essentialism *was* fuelled by an ambivalence towards racial understanding: at the same time as the black population of Britain was increasing in size and symbiotically decreasing in popularity, the notion of a discrete black identity could benefit from a popular promotion. Yet that very identity was under wholesale attack through the tried and tested fears of ethnic 'swamping' to the apparent detriment of whites.

Albert Memmi's *The Coloniser and the Colonised*,<sup>66</sup> another product of 1960s black essentialist revisionism, was written at the time of Olivier's preparations for his role. Without wishing to fall into the trap of envisioning Othello in every

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<sup>63</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Return to my Native Land*, tr. John Berger and Anna Bostock (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), pp. 83-4.

<sup>64</sup> Although *Black Skin, White Masks* appeared in French in 1952 it was not until 1968 that an English-language version appeared. *The Wretched of the Earth* was published in French in 1961 and in English translation in 1965. *Towards the African Revolution: Political Essays* was published in French in 1964 and English in 1967. Aimé Césaire's *Return to my Native Land* was published in French in 1960 and English in 1969 while his *Discourse on Colonialism* was published in French in 1970 and English in 1972. He published poetry throughout the 1960s. Albert Memmi's *The Coloniser and the Colonised* was published in English in 1967. For the purposes of this chapter, the timing of these resistances to French occupation in North Africa should be considered coincidental, but the flurry of publications around the Burge/Dexter *Othello* at least allows me to produce a temporally aligned consideration of blackness.

<sup>65</sup> *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 31.

<sup>66</sup> (Boston: Beacon Place, 1967).

possible colonial situation, I still nonetheless find compelling similarities between Olivier's behavioural approach to his role and Memmi's deconstruction of the repressed black psyche:

I have seen many immigrants who, having recently arrived, timid and modest, suddenly provided with a wonderful title, see their obscurity illuminated by a prestige which surprises even them. Then supported by the corset of their special role, they lift up their heads, and soon they assume such inordinate self-confidence that it makes them dizzy. Why should they not congratulate themselves for coming to the colony? Should they not be convinced of the excellence of the system which makes them what they are? Henceforth they will defend it aggressively; they will end up believing it is right. In other words, the immigrant has been transformed into a colonialist.<sup>67</sup>

As we will see, Olivier exemplifies this transference immediately with an insouciant wafting of a red rose around Iago, 'so that we meet Othello as a pitch-black figure, flashing teeth, crimson mouth slashing the shiny ebony of his face – a slightly effete figure in his hour of relaxation, flourishing a scarlet rose as his thoughts linger on love. This is the jolt, then, of the black-face tragedian'.<sup>68</sup> Olivier would like us to believe that his 'New Romantic' Moor is more Italian than the Italians and, by extension into political reality, more English than the English.<sup>69</sup>

So what, in truth, the disinterested, yet fully ideologised, 1965 audience could have come to expect (but for the prominence of Leavis's 'Black and Bradley' bashing) is what Philip Mason generously described in 1962 as 'Frank...brave, swift in decision but mature in judgement, passionate but master of his passion – not the most ardent apostle of negritude and then African personality could ask for better than this!'.<sup>70</sup> But such sagacious paradigms were not in evidence. What I will take issue with in the following critique of his film is Olivier's appearance before the senate, as the white political establishment that gave this man his visa confronts its guest; his consistent flamboyant, unique, *ur*-gestures, as this outsider reveals a

<sup>67</sup> *The Coloniser and the Colonised*, p. 47.

<sup>68</sup> Judith Crist, *New York Herald Tribune*, cited in Vermilye, p. 163.

<sup>69</sup> In fairness to Memmi (and Shakespeare), Othello cannot simply be crow-barred into every subjugative paradigm; the Moor is a mercenary, a powerful man, a man whose status was never pre-determined. 'There is as little social salvation as there is religious assimilation, he would not be permitted to rise above his social status to join the colonizer group' (*The Colonizer and the Colonized*, p. 73).

bemusing physicality to Venetian and audience alike; the presentation of Iago and the critical insistence on his homosexuality which, if apparent, would undermine Othello's status as sole oppressed minority; and finally, naturally, the *dénouement*, with its infamous Maggie macchiation.

The play was committed to film in three weeks in July, 1965, and released in the USA on 15 December, 1965, and in the UK on 2 May, 1966 as the Royal Command Film Performance.<sup>71</sup> Immediate critical reaction focused on this as a piece of minstrelsy translated from stage to celluloid.<sup>72</sup> *Time*'s unsigned critic argued that the switch did no more than reveal 'the mechanics of [Olivier's] trade in monstrous close-ups'.<sup>73</sup> It is important briefly to dwell upon the camera's circumscriptive liabilities, for even as scenes are rigorously contained so are they enlarged, made immediate: 'The commanding physicality of Olivier's gesture and movement, which on stage would seem to reach out in pain and disbelief and appeal, are filmed in medium shots and close-ups and, as a consequence, his head and torso fill the frame and his gestures and movement are too broad and awkward'.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, so many are the takes in which Othello's face inundates the frame, it is impossible not to see this as racial caricature. At times Olivier simply disappears into his blackness, his eyes and teeth white slits in the murk, in extreme close-up, some perverse inversion of Beckett's labial 'Mouth' in *Not I*.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> *Prospero's Magic: Some Thoughts on Race and Class* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 73.

<sup>71</sup> The name 'Mike Gambon' turns up in the credits as one of the foot-soldiers, this being the Irishman's first appearance on film.

<sup>72</sup> John Cottrell adds: 'Nothing was cut from the stage version; no exterior shots were introduced'. See *Laurence Olivier*, p. 359.

<sup>73</sup> Cited in Douglas Brode, p. 162.

<sup>74</sup> Patricia Tatzpaugh, 'The Tragedies of Love on Film', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 150.

<sup>75</sup> Olivier played Heathcliff, the half-caste, in 1939; critics saw Heathcliff much as they saw his Moor some twenty-five years on: 'Laurence Olivier's Heathcliff is the man. He has Heathcliff's broad lowering brow, his scowl, the churlishness, the wild tenderness, the bearing, speech and manner of the demon-possessed'. See Frank S. Nugent, *The New York Times*, cited in Vermilye, p. 88. Olivier's subsequent role to Othello had him black-up again to play 'The Mahdi' to Charlton Heston's General Gordon in *Khartoum* (dir. Basil Dearden, United Artists, 1966). Critical reception was, as they say, all over the place: 'And so he reapplied his arduous, dark Othello make-up, augmenting the size of his lips, cheeks, eyelids and nose and assuming a careful Sudanese accent. A portrait of frightening, undiluted zealotry, Olivier's Moslem sliced his words with steely perversion and seemed to command heaven and earth...' (Donald Spoto, p. 438); 'Laurence Olivier's Mahdi is strangely weak. Made up in various degrees of black, his tongue between his teeth, Olivier so strives after intonation that what should be an immense character is no character at all' ('D.W.' in *Monthly Film Bulletin*, cited in Vermilye, p. 167); 'The only important drawback of the film, in fact, is the

Harland Nelson confirms the sedentary obeisance of the cinematography, arguing that 'the camera is efficient and self-effacing, not willful or capricious',<sup>76</sup> which, in some ways, is all that is needed to confirm the opposition between Burge's and Welles's methodologies. Where Welles utilised metaphors of entanglement to evince the subjugated conscience, Olivier only used three cameras on a flimsy and constraining set. There are no tracking shots here, no dynamic pursuit of the narrative. Where Welles's camera was a wide-eyed liberator, so Stuart Burge's comes to be a myopic gate-keeper.

As *Othello* opens with Frank Finlay's Iago and Robert Lang's Roderigo in a conspiratorial two-shot,<sup>77</sup> Césaire's poetry wafts into the Venetian night as Roderigo relishes the proclamations of tuppings and neighings and his own 'thick-lips' epithet: 'the wind alas I will continue to hear it / nigger nigger from the depths / of the timeless sky a little less loud than today / ... but I in turn in the air / shall rise a scream so violent / that I shall splatter the whole sky'.<sup>78</sup> Othello enters, in three-quarter shot, swaggering, a great wooden cross smothering his chest, bright white robes accentuating his blackness. He carries himself as if after a long lunch, with a sway and an intermittent limp, a suck of the teeth here, a hummed ballad there. As he comes to face the Signori, we note that he has a barrel belly and wears the amulets and ornamental foot clasps which keep in perpetual memory his slavery. His palms are stained in a lighter brown than his face and neck, a point Olivier is keen to share as he stares at his hues in some wonder. Immediately, 'Olivier's black man is shut off from [other] men by... a self-hypnotizing assurance that the white establishment is too trivial to worry about. He [is]... a Black Narcissus'.<sup>79</sup>

Othello crosses himself at Brabantio's assertion that his daughter is 'abused, stolen from me and corrupted by spells and medicines' (1.3.61-2), which over-emphasises his Christianity; he is, after all, wearing a wooden cross large enough to

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role of the Mahdi... we are given a formidable display of eye-rolling and lip-licking, a weird Peter Sellers Oriental accent and a valiant but unsuccessful attempt to disguise Sir Laurence's all-too-English features with false hair and green lipstick', unsigned, *The Times*, cited in Vermilye, p. 170.

<sup>76</sup> 'Othello', in *Film Heritage 2* (1966): 21.

<sup>77</sup> So implacable is the camera's scope that every meeting of characters seems to contain inherent sedition.

<sup>78</sup> 'Lost Body', in *The Collected Poetry*, p. 245.

<sup>79</sup> Hugh O' Kenner, *National Review*, cited in Brode, p. 165.

span his nipples. Anthony Davies finds these symbols important: 'the medallion and cross which hang around Othello's neck are given a visual emphasis which is not dramatically inappropriate as a reminder of Othello's dependence upon the importance of symbols in the Venetian culture with which he strives to identify. A part of Othello's tragedy is arguably his readiness to make symbols more important than the abstractions for which they stand'.<sup>80</sup> They are also manifest symbols of compliance with white power, far from the unifying image-symbol of Senghor's conscience. The more he fondles his Crucifix, on which his right hand remains until replying to his most potent spectators, the more threatened he seems. I struggle to agree with the assertion that 'it is clear that he does not think of himself as a member of a minority group or of an oppressed race as he aggressively flaunts his blackness, just as later he purposely will emphasise the shock of miscegenation when he embraces Desdemona'.<sup>81</sup>

This, I believe, is precisely *why* he flaunts his Otherness; an over-reaction, an eagerness to publicise his unlikely position, alone and, I believe, tremulous. He flaunts as a result of his oppression. Indeed, in the flamboyance of his movements and the strained pathos that permeates his present, Olivier's Othello before the Senate has more than a touch of his recent Archie Rice,<sup>82</sup> a nervous 'stand-up', working the room: 'To the sophisticated Venetian [Olivier's Moor] is a strange, exotic creature, regarded with a mixture of respect and the same curiosity that draws crowds to a carnival side-show. Placed in this unenviable position he works overtime at the image which has earned him rather backhanded approval in order to ingratiate himself and bolster up his lagging ego'.<sup>83</sup>

This Othello knows all too well he has a story to tell and a captive audience of Venice's powerbrokers in the stained palm of his hand. He hypes accordingly, as with his 'and sold to slavery' when Olivier glances over his shoulder and raises a casual, forgiving palm to the assembly, before confirming his 'redemption thence' (1.3.139). Just as 'Césaire placed the Negro opposite the European, as humanity's

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<sup>80</sup> Anthony Davies, 'Filming Othello', p. 199.

<sup>81</sup> Martin Wine, *Othello: Text and Performance*, p. 49.

<sup>82</sup> As played on film by Olivier in 1960. See *The Entertainer*, dir. Tony Richardson (A British Lion Films release of a Bryanston Films/Woodfall production, 1960).

<sup>83</sup> Constance Brown, 'Othello', in *Film Quarterly* 19 (1966): 50.

source of spiritual rejuvenation, poetic and cultural knowledge and wisdom... [as] the answer to the self-destructive proclivities of industrial Europe; the inevitable opposite of Europe's cultural aridity',<sup>84</sup> so Olivier exacerbates his chance to moisten minds with undue physicality, pitch and range. At 'men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders' (1.3.145-6), he lolls his tongue and waits for the laugh. It does not come, for these Venetians spurn the dismissal of such anthro-impossibility. This Senate, not unlike the British public, clearly believes in the possibility of extant shoulder-headed men, just one genetic misstep away from the Moor who has seen them, met with them, exchanged with them in some way. Even though Othello makes it clear that this part of his tale is a pile of crap, he, the trooper, marches on.

Again, the extreme facial close-ups of the Moor during his defence against abduction, and his travelogue, enforce a kind of stasis, a pictorial essentialism that separates him at every turn. Othello's obvious alterity is complicated by the accents of the white aristocracy that surrounds him, although perhaps not in the way argued by Jack Jorgens: 'the characters in Burge's film are...realistic, despite Olivier's moments of theatrical bravura and the downright un-American articulateness of the actor's readings'.<sup>85</sup> Burge's ensemble is classically trained, vocally clipped and perfectly postured. Maggie Smith's Desdemona, 'cold and doll-like',<sup>86</sup> sounds like a St. Trinian's housemistress, while Emilia's innate Received Pronunciation will produce such gems as 'I am glad I have found this nepkin' (3.3.294). Othello instead emits a lilting *basso profundo* from within his swaggering tub. We might recall that it was Orson Welles who supposedly prompted Olivier to shed an upper octave or two.<sup>87</sup> While his timing is impeccable throughout, the results are full of vocal inconsistencies with ticks, hisses, and words mangled as they are grabbed

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<sup>84</sup> Olu Oguibe, 'Footprints of a Mountaineer: Ugo Ezonu and the Black redefinition of Modernism', p. 501.

<sup>85</sup> Jack Jorgens, *Shakespeare on Film*, p. 193. A curious comment indeed for what is a British film with British actors.

<sup>86</sup> John Russell Brown, *Shakespeare's Plays in Performance*, p. 219.

<sup>87</sup> Welles and Olivier discussed vocalicity when the American was under the Englishman's direction in *Othello* on stage in London in 1951. Dissatisfied with Welles's non-declamatory approach, Olivier 'implored' Welles to kill off his Moor with the dramatic gesture of ear-to-ear throat cutting. Welles thought this was altogether 'a bad idea', a gesture incommensurate with a Moor who bucks stereotyping. Prior to Olivier's rehearsals Welles, who had waited twelve years to return with advice, suggested to Olivier that his voice was too high to play the Moor. According to Welles, a horrified Olivier repaired immediately to voice training, eventually sounding like James Earl Jones. See Barbara Leaming, *Orson Welles*, p. 383.

from the depths, recalling the implausibility of the relationship on show: 'The humanity of the colonized, rejected by the colonizer, becomes opaque... It seems to him that strange and disturbing impulsiveness controls the colonized. The colonized must indeed be very strange, if he remains so mysterious after years of living with the colonizer'.<sup>88</sup>

A. Sivanadan exposes for us the striking similarities between the prevalent Negrophobia at work in Britain, and the consequences of the Doge's dismissal of Brabantio's claims: 'The basic intention of the government, one might say, was to anchor in legislation an institutionalised system of discrimination against foreign labour, but because the labour happened to be black, it ended up by institutionalising racism instead... In trying to banish racism to the gates, it had confirmed it within the city walls'.<sup>89</sup> The first sign of Othello's overweening, misplaced gratitude comes when the Duke manages to patronise everybody in sight in delivering 'If virtue no delighted beauty lack...' (1.3.290). Othello appears delighted at this very public approbation – a sign, surely, of his insecurity – and kisses the Doge's hand and wafts his trailing cloak as a means of showing respect. As the Senate then departs Othello is otherwise ignored. He clearly expects more congratulation than the First Senator's weakly prophetic 'Adieu, brave Moor, use Desdemona well' (1.3.292).

Finlay's Iago is also outside this oral aristocracy; a bluffer RSC-trained Yorkshireman one will ne'er see.<sup>90</sup> Unless you are Kenneth Rothwell, who marks Finlay down as having an 'insinuating lower class accent [that] endows him with an animal cunning more sinister than Machiavellian intrigue... [Iago is a] sinister, leering, foul-minded, lower-class East London type, whose drive to control and manipulate is underscored by this camera work that consistently foregrounds him in profile to give the impression of the master puppeteer manipulating a creature ripe

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<sup>88</sup> Memmi, p. 85. In this context we might recall Iago's 'These Moors are changeable in their wills' (1.3.347-8).

<sup>89</sup> 'Race, Class and the State', in *A Different Hunger: Writings on Black Resistance*, pp. 113-4.

<sup>90</sup> Derek Jacobi's be-mulleted Cassio orates to the heavens, and the condescension with which he reacts to Iago's lack of urbanity, 'You may relish him more in the soldier than in the scholar' (2.1.165-6), is a belittling reminder of the ensign's lower class.

for exploitation'.<sup>91</sup> Geo-linguistics aside, Rothwell touches upon the physical closeness between Othello and his ensign, to many commentators proof of homosexual desire.

As I have already said, proximity is an inevitable corollary of Burge's tightly-framed camerawork which constantly privileges the medium-to-extreme close-up. Constance Brown reads this as constitutive of Iago's 'subtle, homosexual, ruthless efficien[cy]',<sup>92</sup> while another notes the 'lethal mixture of sexual, social and professional jealousy [which] propels Frank Finlay's Iago'.<sup>93</sup> Lois Potter ascribes nothing more than the anodyne to Iago instead of motivated malignance: 'with hindsight, it now seems that [Finlay] belongs, like MacLiammóir, to a new tradition of subdued, ordinary Iagos who succeed because they are taken for granted by everyone else rather than because they inspire any special trust, affection or admiration'.<sup>94</sup>

Personally, I have found no trace of homoerotic desire in Finlay's ensign; he balks at kissing his wife, but makes no credible show of affection for the opposite sex. A love of the camera is a different thing altogether and, although not a patch on Olivier's endless mugging, this is another Iago who thinks on his feet: his key revelatory soliloquy, from 1.3.382-402, sees him straight-to-camera in close-up; his intensity and concentration are commendable; he seduces us directly, as would any salesman.<sup>95</sup> Here is no impotent MacLiammóir, subject to seminal camera angles, but a man who mirrors Memmi to a fault:

Having become aware of the unjust relationship which ties him to the colonized, he must continually attempt to absolve himself. He never forgets to make a public display of his own virtues, and will argue with vehemence to appear heroic and great. At the same time his privileges arise just as much from his glory as from degrading the colonized. He will persist in degrading

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<sup>91</sup> Kenneth Rothwell, *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television*, pp. 67-8.

<sup>92</sup> Constance Brown, 'Othello': 50.

<sup>93</sup> Patricia Tatspaugh, 'The Tragedies of Love on Film', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*, p.151.

<sup>94</sup> *Shakespeare in Performance*, p. 152.

<sup>95</sup> Likewise, Iago's soliloquy which closes Act Two (2.1.284-310): again, he uses the camera to seduce us into yearning for the plain face of knavery to present itself, a superb delivery when confronted by the camera's constraints.

them, using the darkest colours to depict them. If need be he will act to devalue them, annihilate them.<sup>96</sup>

And Olivier has yet to give us any reason to offer our sympathies to the outsider. We are forever implicated in this Iago's plans. These close-ups allow Iago to identify with his audience within much more immediate – and therefore persuasive – spatial parameters, just as we will come to see with Kenneth Branagh's Iago in Oliver Parker's 1995 *Othello*. If Finlay's Iago is in love it is with the mechanical Cyclops that follows his very move.

Othello arrives at Cyprus in full Moorish regalia, kisses his gubernatorial seal and proceeds to undermine the powerful spectacle when, upon seeing Desdemona, he reverts to his fluctuating, rhythmically childish accent: 'I cannot speak enough of this content, it stops me here' (2.1.194-5). 'Excellent wretch' (3.3.90) is wafted by an insouciant Moor, while 'chaos is come again' (3.3.92) sees the camera track – a rare moment's dynamic – to a down-set Iago who is fully extending to the Moor a welcoming left hand, chaos greeting his guest, as he moves to disrobe his master.<sup>97</sup>

Once again, the temptation scene at 3.3 proves pivotal to the relationship between the aggressive coloniser and the unwary colonised: 'The oppressor, through the inclusive and frightening character of his authority, manages to impose on the native new ways of seeing, and in particular a pejorative judgment with respect to his original forms of existing'.<sup>98</sup> This is what Iago achieves with remarkable alacrity at Othello's expense: I am black, I am old, I hate her. From here until his instant breakdown, Olivier responds by building on the bizarre physical gestures which separate him not only from the establishment – both on- and off-stage – but also from any form of physicality I have ever experienced on my own travels.

Finlay's 'Look to your wife' (3.3.200) has an excellent 'told you so' manner

<sup>96</sup> *The Coloniser and the Colonised*, p. 54.

<sup>97</sup> During the booze-fuelled fracas, Bianca is spat upon by a Moor in dish-dash; she herself is black, although unlike Marsha Hunts's Bianca in Trevor Nunn's *Othello*, only by virtue of make-up. She seems entirely unconcerned; Cassio is by now too floored by booze to care. Othello makes his entry in a huge black-and-white striped bathrobe, casually open to the navel, Max Factor smothering his abdomen, only a belt separating him and his titter-worthy tackle from commentary by Dr. Palès's successors.

<sup>98</sup> *Towards the African Revolution: Political Essays*, p. 38.

to it, to which Olivier reactively rolls his well-documented eyes and head, already slow-summoning his fit. 'And yet how nature, erring from itself' (3.3.231) sees Olivier fondle his cross, realising his mistake in converting, in assimilating, in marrying; the message being that as the newcomer has compromised his nature, so will his nature now come to compromise him, but in manifestations of unwieldy gestures which on one level come to complement his self-destructive psyche. Hugh Quarshie writes of a young black actor playing the Moor who, during a rehearsal, said to the assembly, 'I don't think my character would say this'. Quarshie supposes the irritant line to be 'Her name, that was as fresh as Dian's visage, is now begrim'd and black as my own face' (3.3.389-90). Quarshie opines that any black actor would be troubled to pronounce this sentence.<sup>99</sup> Olivier does it with relish, announcing the fact at the top of his register to the unseen gods, clenching his fists, bulging slapstick eyes, straining upon the start, seeming to mock tragedy for the benefit of his audience.

The two-shot that is Iago's telling of the Cassio dream has Olivier holding a three-quarter pose to the left stalls. Oliver crosses his eyes, hyperventilates, turns his hands upon the teller, spits at the ground, and threatens to 'tear her all to pieces!' (3.3.434). Fanon himself marks this shift towards madness: 'In the colonial world, the emotional sensitivity of the native is kept on the surface of his skin like an open sore which flinches from the caustic agent; and the psyche shrinks back, obliterates itself and finds outlet in muscular demonstrations which have caused certain very wise men to say that the native is a hysterical type'.<sup>100</sup> Those wise men, as Fanon well knows, are the historians of myth and science that worked so hard to belittle the black man and who seem to have accounted for Olivier's overarching methodology. Of this on-going destabilization, Jack Jorgens argues that 'we witness the rape of a man's mind and emotions. Othello, with rolling eyes and gaping mouth, registers each word like a man being tortured. All his basest instincts surface

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<sup>99</sup> 'Conventional Folly: A discussion of English classical theatre', in *Black British Culture and Society: A Text Reader*, ed. Kwesi Owusu (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 293. Quarshie, one of the more articulate English stage actors, writes of his own school performance of the Moor as a 'gross absurdity' and the 'theatrical equivalent of a black man telling *Rastus* jokes'.

<sup>100</sup> *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 44.

and he is hideously reborn'.<sup>101</sup> Such self-debasement in the face of exigency could but have confirmed in the minds of the white audience the black immigrant's instability and dangerousness. At '[i]n the due reverence of a sacred vow' (3.3.464), Oliver tears off his cross and prostrates himself before a found-again Allah, straight to camera, a moment's atavism arisen from despair.

As he finally drops, mentally overwhelmed, physically over-determined, we can see him slap the floor with his hand, an old stage trick to break his fall which a more ambitious film would have obviated. 'Pish! Noses, ears and lips' (4.1.42) comes in extreme close-up, his eyeliner leaks and beads of black sweat appear on his face. An absurdity, no doubt. And for Othello's fit, between 4.1.43-59, an eye-rolling coma, apparently 'meticulous in its realism – body locked in a twisted, grotesque position, eyes staring, jaw thrust forward',<sup>102</sup> Olivier, not unknown for stealing scenes with physical spectacle,<sup>103</sup> once more confounded the mortal critic: 'I would not have believed an actor could have managed this, to make of his body the epicentre of the play and show the cracks going out, brain and heart and nerve and all'.<sup>104</sup> On camera, in extreme close-up, these cracks become gaping fissures.

Iago's 'homosexuality' then returns to face the near-cadavered Moor. The ensign, who is 'obsessed with sexual longings that he apparently cannot fulfil... Towards the strong black man whose virility he cannot imitate', of which, aside from the demands of tight, proximal cinematography, I find little evidence, has his sexual ambivalence 'unforgettably clarified when, after Othello breaks down and "falls" to the ground in a trance... Iago straddles him and thrusts the handle of his dagger into his victim's mouth'.<sup>105</sup> There are other possible explanations. We know Othello has fallen into an epilepsy. Without wishing to seem obvious, the dagger's handle would prevent the epileptic swallowing his tongue (and frankly, there was nothing else around to do the job); secondly, and more symbolically

<sup>101</sup> Jorgens, *Shakespeare on Film*, p. 198-9.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

<sup>103</sup> I am thinking of his show-stopping, column-rolling Coriolanus in Peter Hall's 1959 Stratford version of the play. Donald Spoto (p. 378) provides an entertaining description of Olivier's gymnastic death.

<sup>104</sup> Robert Hapgood, 'Shakespeare and the Included Spectator', in *Reinterpretations of Elizabethan Drama*, ed. Norman Rabkin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 130.

<sup>105</sup> Martin Wine, *Othello: Text and Performance*, p. 61.

accurate, I think, is that Iago's very specific actions speak less of sexual desire and more of an anti-Christian inversion of the Moor's proudly worn Cross: transposing the basis of Western religiosity, restoring to the Moor the prelogic of his former faith, and effecting a continuance of Iago's satanic poisoning programme: 'The hissing and frantic panting as he comes out of his fit look like traditional devil business... Othello wide-mouthed shoots out his tongue... the sort of grimace demons have conventionally indulged in since medieval drama'.<sup>106</sup> Iago pushes him and Olivier responds, twisting his face and voice into the screaming crescendo of a hungry, baby boy as the Moor exits, his swagger now snapped into shards.

Olivier's physical domination is enlarged upon at Lodovico's unexpected arrival at Cyprus. As Iago quickly dresses his master in his cloak, so Olivier pokes out his tongue for him to wipe: an instant of gratuitous pink lolling from the blackened mouth, or a genuine sucking up to his ensign, take your pick. The not-so-subtle tantrum at Desdemona's continued defence of Cassio culminates in the slap, coming at 4.1.239, which is full and vigorous. Othello and Desdemona recoil, the jolt equal to both. But the slap is prescribed. Where Welles had insisted on a moment's shock and awe from behind the camera, Olivier draws us to this gross social transgression by doubling up in pain at the blow he has delivered. Desdemona remains motionless, her hand clinging to her stricken cheek. It is Othello who seeks the pity of it. It is not merely that, as Anthony Davies supposes, 'There is no strongly visualised sense of incredulity and shock at Othello's action... the camera concentrates upon the central action but the frame divorces from that action the peripheral response of those whom are its witnesses'.<sup>107</sup> The only response necessary here is Othello's.

'You are welcome, sir, to Cyprus' is offered to Lodovico with wildly extended arms; the pursuant 'Goats and Monkeys!' (4.1.263) gives Olivier the chance to exit up-camera with a wild, wide, sweeping arc of the set. It is the physical over-determination that mars the Moor and suggests that the consummate Olivier had sourced his object material in some troubling, bi-polarised, recesses of his actor's mind. He sweeps amok among the newly-gathered assembly, a baby cut loose from

<sup>106</sup> Harland S. Nelson, 'Othello': 18.

<sup>107</sup> Anthony Davies, 'Filming Othello', p. 198.

his restrainers. The scene with Desdemona is of the dominant white mother in turn worshipped and violently rejected by an errant, needy subject.<sup>108</sup> He genuinely – and I do not say this for mere effect – he genuinely looks to imitate a baboon as he beats his arms against his chest and rages in a fractured *falsetto*. He gets on all fours at one point, a condescension too far, terrified into over-determining the black subject's 'desertion state' that Fanon's Jean Veneuse describes as 'a suffering that is in one way connected to the first experiences of rejection in childhood, and that brings them back in all their strength'.<sup>109</sup>

For the violent finale, Olivier's white robe is held only by a belt, his black chest and abdomen again on show as he moves towards this most physical of closures. His ankle chains re-present his once (and current) servitude. He is hobbling by the time we come to 'It is the cause...' (5.2.1), and just as with the play's opening lines, so Césaire's voice again hovers, this time over Cyprus: 'it is myself terror it is myself... / it is thyself sweetness it is thyself / run through by the eternal sword / and the entire day advancing / branded with the red-hot iron of foundered things...'.<sup>110</sup> During the murder of Desdemona, 'Olivier moves away from the image of a proud man revenging an injury and reaches a kind of grandeur with his subdued suffering'.<sup>111</sup> This disturbs me as, in point of fact, he mauls her with an insanity available to each of us, ours alone being the choice whether or not so to act. I find no grandeur in this. 'Tis too late!' are the words of a madman, smothering his wife with a silk pillow, before suffocating her with hands and mouth, and finally kissing her to death, loving the life out of her, as did Welles to Suzanne Cloutier's Desdemona. 'She's like a liar gone to burning hell' (5.2.127) sees Olivier stand with his arms behind his back, pelvis thrust forward, the posture reeking of success, self-grandeur here, for sure, and diametrically opposed to Emilia's 'Lay thee down and roar' (5.2.196), which sees him drop and simper like a puppy.

<sup>108</sup> The camera slowly back-pans during 'willow', leaving Desdemona and Emilia distant, detached, beyond our help, condemned as they are. The shot returns up close but the point is sweetly made.

<sup>109</sup> *Un Homme Pareil aux Autres*, p. 11, cited in *Black Skin White Masks*, p. 76.

<sup>110</sup> Aimé Césaire, 'It is Myself, Terror, It is Myself', in *The Collected Poetry*, p. 289.

<sup>111</sup> Ace G. Pilkington, 'Othello's Stature: Three Filmed Versions of the Moor', in *Encyclopaedia* 68 (1991), taken from <http://dsc.dixie.edu/Shakespeare/othelloess.htm>.

During Emilia's revelations of the truth there are several cuts to close-ups of the faces of Othello and Iago. Like Welles's moment of doubling through the bars, so Burge fuses the fates of the pair by tracking the emotional response of each to the other. Iago kills Emilia out of revenge and not out of a need to silence her. She dies calmly, her journey's end pronounced through a weakening, spectral voice; but then comes the moment's notoriety: the cruel Moor, slouched against a wall, watches Emilia die, waiting to take centre stage. He physically beckons the flames that will roast him, stabs Iago (who sinks, cruciform),<sup>112</sup> and grabs Desdemona from the bed holding her to him, now a limp doll, the china in smithereens.

And then it is we notice from this fusion of black and white flesh, from living and dead husband and wife, that Olivier's highly buffed Max Factor has smeared Smith's cheek, which suggests a number of coded possibilities. Thankfully discounting the theory of 'the technical difficulty of working with sooty materials', Timothy Murray alights on the signification of 'material traces of nothing less than the Eurocentric horror of miscegenation, a horror often glossed by critical overinvestment in the humanist theme of the enigma of moral darkness'.<sup>113</sup> This is no far cry from the scandal caused by Jonson's *Masque of Blacknesse*, as James I's Queen came close to smearing the hand of the Spanish Ambassador. No glossing here: Oliver restores black and white to its racial, not ethical, space.

Perhaps one might argue that as Othello dies, so he unblackens, darkening Desdemona simultaneously, their colours merging in death as their souls fly upwards, the eternal coupling consummated. But this would mock the trashing of his pearl, much lamented by Othello. As Othello whitens in death, abandoning his black 'identity', so his wife darkens, a symbolized swamping of the State by the outsider; as the Moor tends towards a 'purification', his slab of monumental alabaster suffers an act of graffiti. Miscegeny Ho! Olivier's Moor speaks to Fanon's spirit-fractured colonised, simply unsure of how to present nature's livery in a world that is dominated socially, politically, theatrically, and filmically by whiteness.

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<sup>112</sup> With the suggestion of some perverse allusion to Christ or Saint Sebastian.

<sup>113</sup> *Like a Film*, pp. 109-10.

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By way of concluding this chapter, I am very drawn once again to Arthur L. Little Jr.'s openness and pragmatism in assessing the performative exchange of black and white: 'However well black African bodies may perform blackness, blackness remains an artificial and performative thing, at once imitable and inimitable. Theatrically, blackness becomes a kind of testing ground for whiteness, most immediately for the white actor'.<sup>114</sup> Pauline Kael, pre-eminent of her generation's film critics, attacked this issue in more aggressive and specific terms: 'what Negro actor at this stage in the world's history could dare bring to the role the effrontery that Olivier does, and which Negro actor could give it this reading?...Possibly Negro actors need to sharpen themselves on white roles before they can *play* a Negro. It is not enough to *be*: for great drama it is the awareness that is everything'.<sup>115</sup>

I find this slightly ambiguous: Kael either recognizes caricature when she sees it or she genuinely believes that Olivier had indeed struck at the heart of blackness. But she noticeably fails to interrogate why white actors should not sharpen their focus on black roles before playing a white man. Jyotsna Singh agrees, arguing the pointlessness of Othello's dying plea for a truthful rendering of his soul: 'Thus we cannot really "speak of [Othello as he is]," for his "otherness" as a black man cannot be contained within the dominant, Western fantasy of a singular, unified identity'.<sup>116</sup>

This reverts to a question I asked of *Othello* earlier: what, exactly, is black about Othello, written as the play was by a white man with seemingly no empiric experience of African cultural difference, for an exclusively white audience, and played by a white man with an equal ignorance of 'Otherness', wearing burnt cork on his face? S.E. Ogude firmly believes that the play should be enacted as some kind of white joke:

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<sup>114</sup> *Shakespeare Jungle Fever: National-Imperial Re-Visions of Race, Rape, and Sacrifice*, p. 78.

<sup>115</sup> 'Laurence Olivier as Othello', in *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* (London: Arena Books, 1987), p. 173.

<sup>116</sup> Jyotsna Singh, 'Othello's Identity, Postcolonial Theory, and Contemporary African Rewritings of *Othello*', p. 288.

In a sense, every production of *Othello* is a reenactment of racial tensions, and Othello is pre-eminently a caricature of the black man... That explains why it is a travesty of Shakespeare for a veritable Negro to play the role of Othello. A black Othello is an obscenity. The element of the grotesque is best achieved when a white man plays the role. As the play wears on, and under the heat of lights and action the makeup begins to wear off, Othello becomes a monstrosity of colors: the red-wine lips and snow-white eyes against a background of messy blackness.<sup>117</sup>

I would like us to retain this idea as we move towards more modern Othellos, and to the conclusion of this thesis. The most apparent thing about Olivier's Othello is that he is white and pretending. While I can say that Olivier's is a unique creation, I cannot say what has been created; I am simply unsure. Arthur Little's 'the white actor's inability or ability to play black presumes to become, in a final analysis, a very real testament to the stability or adaptability of whiteness',<sup>118</sup> speaks of the unanswerable insecurities of white people when confronted by the opposite colour, and makes a mockery of Fanon's earnest desire to 'persuade my brother, whether black or white, to tear off with all his strength the shameful livery put together by centuries of incomprehension'.<sup>119</sup>

Olivier's Othello is like no black man I have ever seen in looks or action or word. I know what he is not, but not what he is. Olivier makes it hard to imagine that he is a black man instead of a white man at play, the point being that he denies the black soul its hour of truth. A number of the audience leaving the theatre that night would have been returned to their homes by the very West Indian type that Olivier had thought to capture. Getting on a bus or train must have taken a good deal of white courage. Maybe I should leave the final words to Hugh Quarshie, whose perspective on racial performance is always cogent and necessary: "Look, you arsehole, he's a character, not a racial stereotype." I wonder whether anyone said that to Laurence Olivier'.<sup>120</sup> I wonder indeed.

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<sup>117</sup> 'Literature and Racism: The Example of Othello', p. 163.

<sup>118</sup> *Shakespeare Jungle Fever*, p. 97.

<sup>119</sup> *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 14.

<sup>120</sup> 'Conventional Folly: A discussion of English classical theatre', pp. 293-4.

## Chapter V Revelations from the Womb of Postmodern Time

Not one of the three directors who tackled *Othello* for the mainstream throughout the 1980s and 1990s manages to walk away having spoken of the Moor how he, in his own final analysis, would like to be remembered. In 1981, Anthony Hopkins was summoned by the BBC to fulfil one of the more contentious casting decisions within this canon, and this at a time of disturbing and deep-seated racial unrest spanning a broad area of the United Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> As if *Othello* himself were not separate enough, so a white man was recalled to reinstate a white mask over a black one for the pleasure of a huge, lingering audience. His was also the first British *Othello* dedicated solely to television, and thus would be the first experience of the Moor for a generation of classroom-bound students.

Of the separation from the Venetian oligarchy of Willard White in 1989,<sup>2</sup> Barbara Hodgdon submits that the Jamaican-American's 'position as an opera star marks him as an outsider to both Shakespeare and to Stratford. As it turned out, that alien identity allowed reviewers to smooth over, even erase, questions of race, turning it into a language game, a playful accident of naming'.<sup>3</sup> In a production that somehow sits in the protective shadow of its more flawed, politically-engaged bookends, there remains notable misrepresentation at work in the construction of *Othello* as dramatic foil to Iago, as well as within the presentation of White's black body and self. In short, with his genuine blackness, his physique, and his subterranean oration, Willard White will come to seem diametrically opposed to David Garrick's *Othello* of Chapter II.

Similarly, Laurence Fishburne's performance in Oliver Parker's film suffers, here as a result of the actor's status as a black athletic icon, which image comes to be more important to his own survival as an actor than *Othello*'s as a victim.<sup>4</sup> Yet

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<sup>1</sup> *Othello*, dir. Jonathan Miller (BBC-TV and Time/Life co-production, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> *Othello*, dir. Trevor Nunn (BBC-TV and Primetime Television Ltd., 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Hodgdon, 'Race-ing *Othello*, Re-engendering White-Out', in *The Shakespeare Trade* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), p. 50. 'It was a complicating irony of the production that the black *Othello* was played by a Negro called White, while Bianca – whose name means 'white' – was played by a black actress'. See Stanley Wells, 'Shakespeare Production in England in 1988', in *Shakespeare Survey* 43 (1991): 183-203.

<sup>4</sup> *Othello*, dir. Oliver Parker (Dakota Films/Imminent Films/Castle Rock Entertainment, 1995).

the immediacy with which this film confronts the colour dialectic brings to a reckoning the director's attempt to critique racial prejudice. Parker did so at a time of the now infamous racial unrest surrounding the O.J. Simpson murder trial in California, a crime of passion, still unsolved, which blended almost seamlessly into a four-hundred-year-old narrative. Roger Ebert noted that 'at this moment of the film's 1995 release, with the fates of O.J. and Nicole Simpson projected like a scrim on top of the screen, it is difficult to free the play to do its work'.<sup>5</sup> I would like to take a close look at the distractions caused, largely, by an insouciant director in search of target markets. But first I will attend to the specific racial politics that surrounded Othello's baptism into television.<sup>6</sup>

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Depressingly, Peter Fryer's excellent account of blacks in British history closes with the race riots that broke out across Britain in 1981. Brixton and Liverpool were the chief centres of unrest, he reminds us, of 'youthful rage... the size and scope and ferocity of [which] astonished everyone'.<sup>7</sup> The disturbances of 10-12 April, 1981, triggered a number of other race riots, beyond London and Liverpool and into Bristol, Manchester, and Birmingham: 'The impact of these disturbances... highlighted the deplorable depths to which community-police relations had sunk in inner cities up and down the country where African-Caribbean people had settled'.<sup>8</sup> Anger within black communities had been simmering after a notable number of discrepancies came to light between the Afro-Caribbean opinion of the police force and the police force's opinion of itself. Although it would be

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<sup>5</sup> 'Othello', *Chicago Sun Times*, 29 December, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> I have not included an appraisal of Liz White's South African *Othello* of 1980 in this thesis. The film was not commercially released. 'Regrettably', writes Kenneth Rothwell, 'the film remains sequestered in archives'. See *A History of Shakespeare on Screen*, p. 216. The film would also necessitate a racial appreciation through the oppressive ideology of South African Apartheid and, as such, falls beyond my Anglo-American scope. For further edification, see Peter Donaldson's praise of the film in "'Haply for I am Black": Liz White's Othello', in *Shakespearean Films/Shakespearean Directors*, pp. 127-144.

<sup>7</sup> *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, p. 399.

<sup>8</sup> Harry Goldbourne, *Race Relations in Britain Since 1945* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1998), p. 68.

presumptuous of me to make concrete ideologic connections between Miller's output and this year's highly-charged and violent racial *Realpolitik*, it is important to note the continued malaise that surrounded productions of *Othello*. For an example, one need look no further than the night of 18 January, 1981, some seven weeks before the play was recorded at the BBC, on which thirteen young blacks died and thirty others were injured in a house fire in Deptford: 'Although the cause of the fire was never established beyond doubt...there was circumstantial evidence which led many people to believe that the fire was started by racists'.<sup>9</sup> Miller's *Othello* did not appear on our television screens until 4 October, 1981, by which time the British had suffered ten months of some of their worst racial violence of the twentieth century.

As early as 1973, Shakespearean scholars came to debate television's propensity to confound the divide between exogenous fact and endogenous fiction. Programmes are 'ephemeral, and the opposite of discrete; they "bleed" one into the other, as events in our real world do...A BBC programme such as *The Black and White Minstrel Show* followed immediately by a news programme whose main story is of race rioting in the USA or Britain, the war in Vietnam, or Belfast, generates a kind of irony in the responses of the viewer paralleled only by the "real life" which it reflects'.<sup>10</sup> Given the rioting that was taking place off-screen, we might have stumbled across a more political reason for Miller's decision to cast *Othello* as a light-skinned Arab, a White-a-moor:

Miller argued that the play was about jealousy, not race, and that casting a black actor would encourage audiences to 'equate the supposed simplicity of the black with the exorbitant jealousy of the character'...but what the director's critics really objected to was not his ideology but its practical result: a white actor was to play the most famous black character in drama, in a

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<sup>9</sup> Benjamin Bowling, 'The emergence of violent racism as a public issue in Britain, 1945-81', in *Racial Violence in Britain in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Panikos Panayi (London and New York: Leicester University Press, 1993), p. 204. 'Racism, violence and policing were in newspaper headlines during 1981, not only because of the high incidence of racist attacks, but also because of the widespread outbreaks of violence between the politics and (frequently) black people which occurred during the spring and summer of that year' (p. 211).

<sup>10</sup> Terence Hawkes, *Shakespeare's Talking Animals: Language and Drama in Society* (London: Edward Arnold, 1973), p. 239. *The Black and White Minstrel Show* was, for two decades from 1958, one of the BBC's biggest Saturday night cards, with up to 18 million viewers tuning in to watch blacked up, white Englishmen pretending to be Mississippian slaves at song and dance.

televised version likely to become the standard image of the play for a whole generation of school and university students.<sup>11</sup>

The immediate effects of this decision were to deny the BBC's audience access to an alternative view of televised blackness, away from clips of the perpetrators of the destructive, reactive violence on the streets. Miller's choice bleeds into the then corporate desire of the BBC, and impacts fully upon the curiously empty studios in which the plays were recreated: 'the absence of an audience in television acting – the audience doesn't materialise until the tape is actually shown on a screen – may be a hidden benefit, since one can insist on bold and original interpretations that do not need to be modified to suit the collective wisdom of audiences'.<sup>12</sup> Yet such a view chafes against the standards of institutional hegemony, which Gramscian probabilities were refined by Cultural Materialists during the 1980s. Ace Pilkington argues that in filming the canon, the BBC and Time/Life 'were attempting to create a product that would appeal to the markets they had identified', and further that they desired 'to make films that would conform to the expectational texts of as many of their prospective audience members as possible'.<sup>13</sup> This not only suggests that the television studio will contain instead of liberate, it also confirms that collective wisdom was much in the minds of the Corporation's bureaucrats. Graham Holderness announced that the series 'was produced in the image of the Corporation itself: a classical monument of national culture, an oppressive agency of cultural hegemony'.<sup>14</sup> Taste, so determined the hierarchy, was still not ready for a stab at the genuine article.

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<sup>11</sup> Lois Potter, *Shakespeare in Performance*, p. 154. Potter has Miller's predecessor, Cedric Messina, calling for Earl Jones's casting. It emerges from Stanley Wells that Miller originally thought of Ian Holm for the Moor, although this would not have been likely to change critical disapprobation. See 'Television Shakespeare', in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 33 (1982): 269.

<sup>12</sup> Maurice Charney, 'Shakespearean Anglophilia: The BBC-TV Series and American Audiences', in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 31 (1980): 291.

<sup>13</sup> *Screening Shakespeare from Richard II to Henry V* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1991), p. 22. Pilkington works out the entire budget for the series to be £7 million, or '£89,000 for each of the thirty-seven productions' (p. 28). Michael Mullin provides the full American facts and figures of the creation and television broadcast of the plays in 'Shakespeare USA: The BBC Plays and American Education', in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 35 (1984): 582-589.

<sup>14</sup> 'Boxing the Bard: Shakespeare and Television', in *The Shakespeare Myth*, ed. Graham Holderness (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 181.

The background to the casting of a white Othello was laden with controversy, in that Miller

invited James Earl Jones to play Othello, but Jones was barred by the British actors' association. Miller then cast Anthony Hopkins and, in a curious turnabout, had him play Othello as an Arab, justifying the decision by reinvoking arguments first put forth in the nineteenth century. Discounting Othello's blackness as 'the myth of performance over the text' [Miller] argued that it has 'assumed an importance out of all proportion to its role in the play.' To the Elizabethans, Moor meant no more than 'dark stranger' and if the lines referring to Othello's racial features were eliminated, the play would 'work perfectly well' – in fact, better, since the hero's blackness was a distraction.<sup>15</sup>

Miller's shelving of distraction was insulting to the black actors of the realm, one of whom might have taken this opportunity to show that blacks and whites were essentially the same, or at least to adduce and contextualise the current racism that was affecting blacks in Britain. Robert Cruz writes of the seeming inevitability of Miller's decision:

when black people choose film as a means of earning a living, as a channel for political action, for our particular and specific aesthetic creations, for entertainment and for pleasure, we constantly have to work with and against a technology which is not neutral. This becomes more problematic when we, through the colonial relationship and being black in Britain today, are part of the same society and its particular technology while at the same time excluded, marginalized, and made part of the problems of this society.<sup>16</sup>

Stephen Bourne cites an interview with the black actor, Rudolph Walker, whose disappointment at the casting of a white-skinned actor was stark: 'That whole episode was particularly painful... for a lot of black actors in this country. The BBC bluntly refused to use any of the black actors in this country, saying that we were just not good enough. There was something rather unsavoury about that'.<sup>17</sup> Critical disquiet extended beyond the black community and into the academy,

<sup>15</sup> Mythili Kaul, 'Background: Black or Tawny? Stage Representations of Othello from 1604 to the Present', in *Othello: New Essays by Black Writers*, ed. Mythili Kaul (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1997), p. 19.

<sup>16</sup> 'Black Cinemas, Film Theory, and Dependent Knowledge', in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, eds. Houston A. Baker, Jr., Manthia Diawara, and Ruth H. Lindenberg (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 111.

<sup>17</sup> *Black in the British Frame: Black People in British Film and Television 1896-1996* (London and Washington: Cassell, 1998), p. 145. Walker made his name in the ITV sitcom, *Love Thy Neighbour*.

where Miller's levelling of the turf was forcibly impugned: 'Unfortunately, his [Miller's] understanding of character is not the same as Shakespeare's; and by imposing his own analytical bias on *Othello*, he robbed the play of an essential racism with which Shakespeare did confront his audience and pared down a great tragedy until it was no more than a closet melodrama'.<sup>18</sup> Sujata Iyengar describes Anthony Hopkins's Moor simply as a 'racialised buffoon',<sup>19</sup> although Susan Willis thought the production had 'great beauty', continuing that '*Othello*, of all Shakespeare's tragedies, seems ideal for television: it is a play of relationships, intense and personal, against a canvas of military events that never transpire... Spectacle and public oration are not an issue... The camera brings us close to the characters' agony and deceptions, and Miller used that intimacy to great effect'.<sup>20</sup>

As we shall see, Miller succeeds in transplanting the play's social minutiae to this micro-medium, ultimately providing us with 'an *Othello* consciously domesticated to... television's 21-inch expectations'.<sup>21</sup> Yet he missed, or glossed, the biggest trick of all: 'An emphasis on racism as we understand that term today clearly demeans the play, but at the same time to deny the undeniable reference in the text to *Othello*'s blackness and its symbolic value and to focus on so narrow a theme as an ordinary man's jealousy provoked by an envious "practical joker" comes perilously close to invalidating the play as tragedy'.<sup>22</sup>

Martin Wine pretty much hits the nucleus of critical anxiety towards this production. Miller, though, responds by citing the same type of argument that

<sup>18</sup> James C. Bulman, 'The BBC Shakespeare And 'House Style'', in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 35 (1984): 580.

<sup>19</sup> 'White Faces, Blackface: the Production of "Race" in "Othello"', in *'Othello': New Critical Essays*, p. 118.

<sup>20</sup> *The BBC Shakespeare Plays: Making the Televised Canon* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), pp. 124, 120-1.

<sup>21</sup> Lynda E. Boose, 'Grossly Gaping Viewers and Jonathan Miller's *Othello*', in *Shakespeare, The Movie: Popularizing the plays on film, TV, and video*, eds. Lynda E. Boose and Richard Burt (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 186.

<sup>22</sup> Martin Wine, *Othello: Text and Performance*, p. 78. Wine here refers to the debt owed by Miller to W.H. Auden's essay 'The Joker in the Pack', which first appeared in England in the poet's *The Dyer's Hand and other essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), pp. 246-72. A version of the essay appears in John Wain's *Shakespeare: 'Othello': A Selection of Critical Essays* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981), pp. 199-223. Here, Auden proposes Iago to be the play's sole dramatic agency, for 'all the deeds are Iago's' (Auden, p. 246).

foreshadowed Edmund Kean's noble bronzing a century-and-a-half before: 'In *Othello*, the issue of race has been too greatly emphasized, and in the most unfortunate way with the blacking up of white actors and the crude stereotype of the lithe black body, which reflects racism rather than race'.<sup>23</sup> Instead, Miller 'found someone who could embody the exotic magnificence of a foreign warrior, a Mediterranean magnifico who comes from elsewhere'.<sup>24</sup> As we will see, that crude stereotype is not necessarily debunked by colour-correct casting.

I am not suggesting that Miller treats the vexed issue of race in Shakespeare with arbitrary urges. His two groundbreaking productions of *The Tempest* (1970, 1988) notionally respond to the type of malaise that arose in 1981, and make clear his polemical intent for that play's outsiders. In 1988, for example, his Old Vic *Tempest* 'represented Prospero's island as a Third World colony. The Neapolitan visitors were white actors in Jacobean costume; in contrast, Ariel, Caliban and three islanders were played by black actors... At the finale, Miller... provid[ed] a vignette of the island after Prospero's departure, but his focus was Ariel, not Caliban'.<sup>25</sup> This vignette saw Ariel take up Prospero's disused staff and point it towards Caliban, 'a detribalized field hand'.<sup>26</sup> With his freedom, Ariel, 'a Patrice Lamumba figure... French-speaking, Sorbonne-educated, fly-whisk-wielding, ironic, well-spoken [and] obedient rather than servile',<sup>27</sup> becomes a master, stepping into the subjugating role now abandoned by the Milan-bound colonizer, reflecting the director's 'awareness that the breakdown of European imperialism had mixed results, occasionally producing totalitarian regimes as repressive as any foreign rule'.<sup>28</sup>

Miller here understood Prospero's departure to be a specifically postcolonial moment; his use of black skin stimulated critical debate into the psychic remnants

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<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Miller, *Subsequent Performances* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), p. 157.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>25</sup> Alden T. Vaughan, and Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Shakespeare's Caliban: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 197.

<sup>26</sup> Trevor R. Griffiths, "'This Island's Mine": Caliban and Colonialism', in *Critical Essays on Shakespeare's The Tempest*, ed. Virginia Mason Vaughan, and Alden T. Vaughan (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1998), p. 148.

<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Miller, *Subsequent Performances*, p. 160.

<sup>28</sup> *Shakespeare's Caliban: A Cultural History*, p. 197. For a further review of Miller's 1988 *The Tempest*, see Patricia E. Tatspaugh, 'The Old Vic *Tempest*', in *Shakespeare Bulletin* 7 (1989): 8-9.

of colonial control and subsequent abandonment. Given this relative positivity towards the oppressed, one can but wonder why, nine years earlier, this acclaimed director chose instead the steep and thorny way to racialisation. The video box gives us some further clues as to his thoughts on blackening the Moor. Anthony Hopkins' sharp blue eyes gaze into space as Bob Hoskins' Iago, all darkness visible, counterweights the Moor's pose. From this presentation, either could be Othello.<sup>29</sup> Yet it will be Hoskins who comes to dominate the small screen, in appearance no less swarthy than the Moor, his brooding, squat face and thick, Mafioso stubble captivating the camera. The flesh-tones choice resonated within the text as well as beyond the BBC's walls, for Miller, having 'hijacked the play for his own political purposes in casting Anthony Hopkins in the role... meant that Bob Hoskins's Iago had to be a psychopath, as opposed to another jealous character within the script, one whose feelings could be "explained" by racism, even if Iago's rationalist orientation could not delve to the root of his motivation'.<sup>30</sup>

Martin Wine thinks that Hoskins' visual presentation fits the play's separatist polemic, that '[w]ith his cockney accent, cropped hair, simple black leather costume, and the snake-like manner in which he sidles up to the courtiers, Iago, not Othello, is the outsider among the well-spoken, handsomely coiffed, and elegantly attired Venetians'.<sup>31</sup> Not so, responds Lynda E. Boose: 'Watch in particular for how... a male iconography of bald heads and similarly cut beards works progressively to define Iago as the true junior member and visual heir apparent to the play's all-determining boys club, the Venetian patriarchy... Color Iago's hair white and add some years, and, visually, he would be one of them'.<sup>32</sup> Neither is

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<sup>29</sup> Hopkins' blue eyes will dazzle and confound throughout, even as Othello will soon smudge his black eyeliner with tears. 'I think we probably allowed the make-up people to do too much with him'. Or not enough. See *Subsequent Performances*, p. 159.

<sup>30</sup> H.R. Coursen, *Reading Shakespeare on Stage* (London: Associated University Press, 1995), p. 39.

<sup>31</sup> *Othello: Text and Performance*, p. 77. 'In casting the cockney actor Bob Hoskins as Iago several images came together in one person. The rough army sergeant, the puritan trooper at Naseby and the mischief-making fairy-tale dwarf – a primal trickster like Rumpelstiltskin'. See Jonathan Miller, *Subsequent Performances*, p. 149. Throughout his performance, Hoskins also (thuggishly) recalls his gangster, Harold Shand, from the film that brought him to prominence, *The Long Good Friday* (dir. John Mackenzie, Handmade Films, Ltd., 1980).

<sup>32</sup> 'Grossly Gaping Viewers and Jonathan Miller's *Othello*', pp. 187-9. Had he but lived, Roland Barthes would have noted Boose's debt to him, for she seems to have in mind precisely the type of

invalid; metamorphosis is the key for Hoskins' protean ancient. He begins by dipping his head into a barrel of water, one of the 'cisterns' that will appear throughout.<sup>33</sup> He shows us how simple it is to *appear* clean in Venice, to be not what one is. He mimes with gusto the motions of an old black ram yet, in articulation, there is little vehemence in relation to colour, and here we see an immediate indication of Miller's racial angst, as 'words about Othello's blackness skitter off into the air, signifiers in search of signifieds'.<sup>34</sup>

Othello's entry is calm and underplayed, lacking any form of grandiosity. To the modern viewer, Hopkins is a bizarre visual hybrid of Michael Hutchence and Antonio Banderas, minus the flair: 'Hopkins' naturalistic performance, by definition, is not grandiose or heroic. But it is not ordinary either; his incessant fiddling, little half-smiles and nervous nodding and murmuring while others speak to him suggest insecurity or absentmindedness, if not neurosis'.<sup>35</sup> So we are present at a duel unto the death between a neuropath and a psychopath, neither of whom frankly commands the greatest of trust.

*In camera*, Iago, ever the rational psycho, roars with laughter at Brabantio's conviction that his daughter was 'abused, stolen...and corrupted' (1.3.60). Othello responds half asleep, placing one hand casually on the grand council table and commencing with 'Most potent, grave, and reverend...' (1.3.77). He looks bored and sounds as if he is reading from an instruction booklet, rather than a man defending his own life. Says Peter Conrad, 'Hopkins...doesn't orate or emote, and he mutes the noises made by others...Noise is offensive because it signifies failing self-control'.<sup>36</sup> At the whispered 'the cannibals', Hopkins pauses and turns to face the room, expecting to be halted by righteous incredulity. He repeats the sequence for 'the anthropophagi'. At 'men whose heads' (1.3.145), the camera cuts to a medium shot of the seated Duke, who shifts forward, his chin embedded in the palm

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iconography that he critiqued so successfully in 'The Romans in Films', in *Mythologies* [1957], (London: Vintage, 1993), pp. 15-25.

<sup>33</sup> 'But there, where I have garner'd up my heart, / Where either I must live... / Or keep it as a cistern for foul toads / To knot and gender in' (4.2.58-63).

<sup>34</sup> Ace G. Pilkington, 'Othello's Stature: Three Filmed Versions of the Moor'. Originally published in *Encyelia* 68 (1991), taken from <http://dsc.dixie.edu/Shakespeare/othelloess.htm>.

<sup>35</sup> Potter, *Shakespeare in Performance*, p. 155.

<sup>36</sup> 'Living Room Tragedy', in *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 October, 1981: 1203.

of his hand, never more alive than now, as the rest of the Senate leans in to the frame, the spatial representation recalling Renaissance group portraiture, a pictorialisation which has not evaded critical attention: while '[a]mid the more realistic space, the plenitude of black and white costumes has a richness and life, an appropriateness',<sup>37</sup> it is no less valid to argue that '[u]nlike Renaissance emblems and symbolic codes, or even the labyrinthine patterns of Orson Welles's film, Miller's patterns are empty of moral significance; their "curious perspectives" lead not to a true point of view but to a vanishing point'.<sup>38</sup> A true case of style over substance. Hoskins's Iago makes use of such Albertian tropes at the close of Act One, and here, via the play's chief moral degenerate, one can at least understand the morality vacuum that Miller sought to establish as Iago's piercing black eyes project through the screen. 'Hell and night' (1.3.401) sees him in close-up, held in a theatrical three-quarter pose, a soft, blue light on his cheeks, his eyes radiating anger as he cackles with Mephistophelean malice.

At Cyprus we are at least given the space for foreground and background, something which we were denied in Venice. Miller takes the opportunity to fill these voids with figures and narrative, wherein 'everyone in shot is active, often broken into smaller side groups with their own apparent conversations',<sup>39</sup> such as when Cassio and Desdemona kiss hands while a distant Iago demonstrates the ease with which he will use his snares. To look again at these deep focus shots is to see how Hoskins, as did Frank Finlay, and as will Ian McKellen and Kenneth Branagh, comes to dominate the camera's gaze. Whenever he gets close to anybody, the camera follows, creating unnerving propinquity and unanswerable sequestrations of space. Such closeting is an advantage of the medium, according to Michèle Willems: 'The space provided by the screen will be entirely devoted to what is said and heard as the important conversations are recorded in close shots [which] though

<sup>37</sup> Susan Willis, *The BBC Shakespeare Plays: Making the Televised Canon*, p. 124.

<sup>38</sup> Potter, *Shakespeare in Performance: Othello*, p. 156. 'Miller was aware that the average television screen was about the size of a small Dutch painting; he thus treated each frame as a canvas, showing characters, sometimes distractingly, through doors and windows, at the ends of corridors, or in mirrors' (Potter, p. 154). Lynda E. Boose has a number of things to say of the film's painterly leanings. See 'Grossly Gaping Viewers', pp. 187, 190-1. We will encounter a similar plenitude, whose semiotic lacks appropriateness, in Parker's film.

<sup>39</sup> Susan Willis, *The BBC Shakespeare Plays: Making the Televised Canon*, p. 122.

often decried, remains the basic advantage of the medium; it helps the viewer to follow the text as the facial expressions and reactions of speaker and listener can be registered with an intensity that cannot be equalled on the stage'.<sup>40</sup>

Such intimacy is in evidence as Othello returns to break up the brawl with whispering introspection, a fine example of how television's coziness can come to stymie the Moor's infected will, for Hopkins appears embarrassed to command in this way. Prior to the drinking scene, his tired Moor treats the troops to some sleight-of-hand magic trickery, the point being, I think, to show that this is the only 'witchcraft', the only extraversion, he practices. Peter Conrad picks up on this point, arguing in his review of the film that 'the character's self-invention becomes, for this Othello, a game in which he wearily consents to amuse his colleagues, who expect him to be an outlandish prodigy'.<sup>41</sup> Yet, there is simply not enough outward display of energy, authority and difference in Hopkins' Moor, whose inconsistencies will be fully exposed in Act Three.

This temptation scene, a 'tour de force',<sup>42</sup> runs as an interchange between an unsteady teacher (Hopkins) and a recalcitrant pupil and takes place within the same room, the characters moving on the chequered floor like pieces in an endgame. Even while denying his own feelings, Othello leans over Iago, who sits at the table, and slaps his hands with a ruler: 'Nay, yet there's more in this...' (3.3.133). Iago then appears directly at the Moor's shoulder, squeezing psychology into proximity.<sup>43</sup> Othello's reactions are ambivalent. And it is here, as he leans, his hair curled and pushed straight up, a tawny Al Sharpton, that we note the remarkable codpiece which parts the lower buttons of Hopkins' shirt. Pascale Aebischer claims that '[t]he accusation of racist stereotyping is very elegantly avoided by making Othello a white man, even if the play's references to his blackness becomes rather

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<sup>40</sup> 'Verbal-Visual, Verbal-Pictorial or Textual-Televsual? Reflections on the BBC Shakespeare Series', in *Shakespeare Survey* 39 (1987): 102. Miller said that TV production 'means the people haven't got to boom or to sing or to go in for that rather grandiloquent verse-speaking which often puts people off'. See Tim Hallinan, 'Interview: Jonathan Miller on The Shakespeare Plays', in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 32 (1981): 134.

<sup>41</sup> 'Living Room Tragedy', in *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 October, 1981: 1203.

<sup>42</sup> Susan Willis, *The BBC Shakespeare Plays: Making the Televised Canon*, p. 122.

<sup>43</sup> 'Iago treats Othello as an analyst treats a patient except that, of course, his intention is to kill not cure' (Auden, 'The Joker in the Pack', p. 266).

pointless. Othello's violence is not as a result of his racial otherness but rather of his violent phallic sexuality as symbolised by the most extravagantly prominent codpiece imaginable'.<sup>44</sup> This is precisely the point, I believe; that an aggressive sexuality, a trope created, as we have seen, as a form of black social control, should be so foregrounded through a codpiece (which accessory Othello alone wears), suggests that Miller, not so super-subtle, had curiously reneged on his undertaking to minimize essential difference.<sup>45</sup>

Othello goes on confidently to assert that Desdemona 'had eyes and chose me' (3.3.192), but when left alone, with Iago distant, in deep focus, he begins to tremble, distracted: 'why did I marry?' (3.3.245). As soon as Iago spots the minor collapse, he is back, right in the Moor's face, as the camera starts to close in on Hopkins's lamentational '[h]aply for I am black' (3.3.267). As the camera stops at Hopkins shoulders for 'Ha! Ha! False, to me?' (3.3.337), we see that the Moor is now convinced of his wife's guilt. The ensuing 'Othello's occupation's gone!' (3.3.360) is whispered knowingly, almost submissively, in total contrast to the hysterics with which Olivier greeted the news. At least Hopkins builds his madness with some method (regardless of whether with more legitimacy), grabbing Iago by the lapels and slamming him against a wall when asked whether he might like to watch his wife and Cassio making the Beast together. He falls to animal noises for Iago's 'as prime as goats' (3.3.406), and by the time he reaches 'Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell!' (3.3.450), we come to see how totally unfit Hopkins is, as he sweats heavily under the lights through his mad moments.

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<sup>44</sup> 'Black Rams Tugging White Ewes: Race vs. Gender in the Final Scene of Six *Othellos*', in *Retrovisions: Reinventing the Past in Film and Fiction*, eds. Deborah Cartmell, I.Q. Hunter, and Imelda Whelehan (London: Pluto Press, 2001), p. 64. Lynda E. Boose describes the bizarre appendage as 'a sartorial accessory of the Jacobean era that, to modern eyes, looks like a leather cat-o'-nine tails attached to a sheathed silver knife', as 'a metonymic inscription of phallic sadism', and as 'a telling iconography of wife-murder' ('Grossly Gaping Viewers', pp. 190-1). Of the penile interjection: as Iago woos Cassio at 3.1 he rests his sword on the table so that the shaft, ascending, intrudes into their private conversation. Once Cassio leaves, the close-up of Iago retains just the tip of the sword seeming, through foreshortened perspective, to touch his cheek, in a Damoclean forewarning.

<sup>45</sup> In making a connection between the *Commedia dell'Arte* and black skin, Adam Lively points out the 'parallels between the figure of Harlequin and the phallophores of the ancient world, performers who wore giant phalluses and "besmeared their countenances with soot... or covered their faces with papyrus bark... to represent foreign slaves"'. See *Masks: Blackness, Race and the Imagination* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 26.

As he returns for Act Four and epilepsy, Othello has a pronounced, visible shake to him; something that can take years to be appropriated into the central nervous system appears within minutes, as if by magic, on TV. As Othello rues his luck and ponders his wife's death, Miller comes up with a powerful split-screen effect which visualises the pouring of Iago's filth into the Moor's mind. Hopkins sits, foreground screen left, slumped at a table. The vast space of the room beyond him is empty until Iago appears at the distant door. Hoskins then walks slowly to camera, filling up the empty space – the Moor's innocence – and demanding both our and his master's engagement in the matter. Othello by this point has his head buried in his hands, weeping as he feels all love being sucked out of him: 'My heart is turned to stone: I strike it, and it hurts my hand' (4.1.179-80). More striking comes with the slap from an Othello with his back to camera; the result sends Penelope Wilton's Desdemona into paroxysms of indignity and Othello into a Lecterian blueprint, with a scowl and a lolling tongue. On 'Goats and monkeys!' (4.1.263), he reaches a transgressional climax of sorts by spitting – yes, spitting – on a BBC set in 1981.

The claustrophobic closeness of Act Five reveals the strengths of televisual Shakespeare, with intimacy heightened by rapidly exchanged whispers which would be lost even to the front row of a theatre. Peter Conrad reminds us that 'interpretation of Shakespeare, for Miller, doesn't mean the ascribing of motives. It is simply a matter of policing diction and censoring vocal mannerisms, persuading the actors to treat the verse as though it were prose'.<sup>46</sup> Desdemona's death rattle is the stuff of horror cliché, with the camera in close-up on Hopkins' now insane Othello, and Desdemona's hand alone visible, grabbing onto the Moor's beard. As her husband reaches the point of no return, her grip weakens, her fingers loosen, and her hand slowly falls off-screen.<sup>47</sup> As he forces his dying wife 'once more, once more' to kiss him (5.2.17), his codpiece stands up like a Bishop's mitre and, 'With a downward thrust of his arm that disappears below the camera shot, he implicitly brings the play's sexual meanings to horrific climax by enacting his death as a self-

<sup>46</sup> Peter Conrad, 'Living Room Tragedy', in *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 October, 1981: 1203.

<sup>47</sup> The farewell speech, to T.S. Eliot 'self-congratulatory', comes down to us from Hopkins more as a genuine goodbye: thoughtful, downcast, inevitable.

emasculatation that tropes itself by reflexively figuring the phallus as both aggressor/agent and victim of his own aggressions'.<sup>48</sup>

Miller positions us as villains with his decision to obey Lodovico's 'This object poisons sight' (5.2.362). Of the films I critique in this thesis, Miller's stands alone in refusing to show us the tragic loading. The director instead places his camera at the door of the bedroom looking out at the retiring Venetians, with the wounded Michael Cassio dutifully dragged along. We are in the doorway of a room with three dead bodies on a bed, but we cannot see them. But we know they are there. This proves to be an unnerving closure, a moment when the visual truth is withheld – much as it was by Miller's decision to lighten the Moor – a victim of the vortex that is all things Iago.

Sandwiched between Miller and Parker, between the destructive monomania of British law enforcement and, as we will see, an equally destructive American racial and ethnic bifurcation in the mid-1990s, comes Trevor Nunn's *Othello* of 1989 with, surprisingly, a seemingly uncontentious Moor. Anne Barton thought the play on stage to be 'intensely domestic, even ordinary',<sup>49</sup> while Virginia Mason Vaughan declares that the directorial consideration of race 'remains understated... as if it were implicit in the situation but not dominant'. Instead, Nunn focuses on 'the search for meaning in human relationships, the struggle to find trust and intimacy in a world of appearances, the fragility of human bonds'.<sup>50</sup> This said, the theme of race is hard to minimise in a production which cast the first black *Othello* to appear at Stratford since Paul Robeson in 1959. In these circumstances, it is impossible not to notice race – in the form of an unadorned black actor – and how it is presented. Barbara Hodgdon seems closer to the mark: 'Nunn's [film of *Othello*] seems acutely conscious of catering to a white (British) imaginary, especially in selecting an ambiguously colonial locale where any racist burrs can be attributed to a past historical moment. Although Nunn maintains that casting a black

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<sup>48</sup> Lynda E. Boose, 'Grossly Gaping Viewers', p. 194.

<sup>49</sup> 'Other places, other customs', in *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 September, 1989: 975.

<sup>50</sup> '*Othello*': a contextual history, p. 219.

actor was essential "for political reasons," he conveniently elides what these might be for 1980s Britain'.<sup>51</sup>

Her first point would obtain for Miller too, in the play's encapsulation by and submergence into scenes of recognizable, centuries-old, continental *mise-en-scène* representation as a means of diverting conscientious objection. Politicisation of Shakespeare clearly extends to the search for salvation from perceived errors past; it would be hard to believe that Nunn's reasoning was not weighted by Olivier's and Hopkins' need to black up. So Nunn might be lauded for ensuring that the racial theme was (finally) implicit in ideology and explicit in presentation.<sup>52</sup>

What dominates in this movie, over and above the immediacy of White's colour, is the sheer juvenileness of the ensemble's response to Shakespeare. There is a constant sense of events being too big for the participants, of the absence of a grown-up authority to stymie Iago's machinations. Not only does this revert Othello to the status of noble savage, with the Moor's pure untaintedness standing in marked contrast to the ills of the nineteenth-century society that Nunn sketchily recreates, the constant infantile demonstrations of all the main characters (excepting Emilia) fully suggests that none can either control or be responsible for his own actions. The adults are nowhere to be seen.

Take, for example, Roderigo's major hissy fit in front of Iago upon discovering that Desdemona has married Othello. He is utterly distraught at the loss of his intended, with whom he is clearly besotted, and wails over this 'first love lost', beating his hands against the ground as would a teenager. Take, for another example, the entire essence of Imogen Stubbs's Desdemona: a squeaky, naïve plaything for the play's equally innocent and out-of-depth male coterie. Clive Swift's Brabantio blubs at length and uselessly before John Burgess' Doge, and Sean Baker's Cassio has an atavistic, schoolboy crush on the 'divine Desdemona', which child's play is supplemented by one of the more bizarre yet telling camera shots in the *Othello* filmic canon: as Iago offers us a running commentary on Cassio

<sup>51</sup> 'Race-ing Othello, Re-engendering White-Out', p. 50.

<sup>52</sup> See also H.R. Coursen, 'A Space for Shakespeare: VIII. Trevor Nunn's *Othello*', in *Shakespearean Performance as Interpretation* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1992), pp. 216-19.

and Desdemona as 'he takes her by the palm' (2.1.167), Nunn's camera captures Cassio's solicitude through the open legs of a telescope's tripod – which works as an internal framing device – a stark and highly suggestive juxta-positioning of compassion and desire.<sup>53</sup> Iago, too, with his 'flat, clipped, unsurprisable, take-it-or-leave-it northern accent',<sup>54</sup> tends to toy with his maturity, chortling aloud at Desdemona's repost to her father – 'But here's my husband' (1.3.184-5) – and presaging the ridiculous means by which he will attack this apparently ridiculous union.

Yet overall, Ian McKellen's magnificent, mutagenic Iago proves the exception to this youthful colloquy. His duality is made manifest in 'I am not what I am' (1.1.64), as McKellen screens his face by exhaling smoke from one of the cigarette butts he obsessively collects. This masking would work less well on stage: we would not be privileged with the 'personal' close-up, with Iago in our collective, couch-bound faces. The obsessive, close movements of the camera around the villain-in-chief and its privileging of McKellen's gloriously expressive face once again leads us to understand that 'with its eye for detail and quick movements from viewpoint to viewpoint, television is an Iago medium'.<sup>55</sup> McKellen infuses his Iago with 'a personality warped and eaten up by jealousy, by a contemptuous sense of his own inability to wield power, a gnawing longing to do so – and to stop others from doing so',<sup>56</sup> which performative description would append equally well to the impotence of Micheál MacLiammóir's ensign. He also has a fetish for celerity, for swift double-dealings, and for ultra-tidy conclusions. All his puerile sniggering is merely a way of ingratiating himself into the Venetian nursery, of approaching on equal terms those whose wills he will subvert. He is a petty thief – he swags Senatorial cigars from the table in the empty chamber – with a macro role to play: 'The technical precision of [McKellen's] performance tropes his mastery over the narrative, and because he also controls the material objects that mark the film's

<sup>53</sup> A coy Cassio later presents the depressed Desdemona with a box of chocolates which she and Emilia will tuck into with great schoolgirl relish.

<sup>54</sup> Robert Smallwood, 'Shakespeare at Stratford-upon-Avon, 1989 (Part I)', in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41 (1990): 113.

<sup>55</sup> H.R. Coursen, *Watching Shakespeare on Television* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1993), p. 151.

<sup>56</sup> Robert Smallwood, 'Shakespeare at Stratford-upon-Avon, 1989 (Part I)': 114.

densely particularized attention to social detail...it is he who anatomizes and manipulates its optical economy, as through the eyepiece of a microscope'.<sup>57</sup>

To supplement McKellen's spell-binding appropriation of evil, Nunn, unlike Stuart Burge, at least utilises the camera's potential for close-up and discrete distantiation, not least in the Senate with Wellesian deep focus, allowing us to register the on-going interest of Iago in all events *without* the need for him to dominate our view. In the Senate, Iago alone is visible (although part-obscured) in deep focus, while Brabantio pours out his broken heart to the Duke. Again, he appears in the background – the spirit of MacLiammóir's hovering ancient – as Othello delivers his 'round, unvarnished tale' (1.3.91).

The straight-to-camera delivery is one of Nunn's most potent directorial weapons and a trope with which McKellen – and here we should recall his later antics as Richard Loncraine's Richard III<sup>58</sup> – proves ascendant and domineering. 'And what's he then that says I play the villain' (2.3.331) is pure Iago, Duke of Gloucester, as McKellen works himself into an ecstasy of first-person evil. Nunn continues to elicit Iago's hunger for control through any number of side-glances to camera. When we doubt, we can only look at Iago, for Nunn forces us to place our trust in a character who has 'the soul of a servant and the instincts of a destroyer: a trim, vicious and compulsively tidy male mother-hen whose manhood is sublimated in professional resentment and in keeping order in the army'.<sup>59</sup> A good example of his all-seeing eye comes after a long night's brawling at Cyprus: McKellen falls asleep, exhausted, until woken some ten seconds later by a Muezzin's call to morning prayer. He sits bolt upright to attention, in our faces once again. He is a machine that needs no sleep.<sup>60</sup>

By contrast, Willard White is far less effective in manipulating both camera and viewer. White, whose eyebrows leap heavenwards throughout his explicatory speech to the Senate, delivers the 'cannibals and anthropophagi' (1.3.144-5) straight

<sup>57</sup> Barbara Hodgdon, 'Race-ing Othello, Re-engendering White-Out', p. 51.

<sup>58</sup> *Richard III*, United Artists, 1995.

<sup>59</sup> John Peter, 'How to give a blind Moor new vision', in *The Sunday Times*, 27 August, 1989: C9.

<sup>60</sup> It is worth recalling that Welles had two Arabic musicians intoning *Allahu Akbar* as a reminder of the Moor's spiritual origins. Nunn instead has Church organ music piped in, a reminder of the dominant ideology herein.

to us, as a means of questioning the beliefs of his audience as well as of the Senate. 'T'was pitiful, t'was wondrous pitiful' (1.3.162) is likewise delivered to a first-person camera, in search of supplementary audience pity. But such is White's lack of vocal ease, both as actor and Moor, that his plea for understanding comes across as the work of a jaded sophist. Anne Barton thinks '[t]his towering, negro general...as alien to the Venetians in his speech as in his physical presence'.<sup>61</sup> To some critics, White 'is as magnificent physically as he is vocally. His looks are leonine and he moves with the heavy agility of a great cat. His potentially murderous power and danger, never in doubt, are a large part of his attraction'.<sup>62</sup> But this must be off-set against his performative presence, 'all burnished tone [and]... little sense of a soul slowly blasted by fire'.<sup>63</sup> White apparently 'shares the qualities of Robeson's magnificent baritone voice',<sup>64</sup> but if this is so, then Robeson was a verse-mangler too. White's problems here derive from a hybrid Caribbean lilt and soft east-coast US accent, expelled in tones so deep as to ridicule Olivier's vocal gymnastics. He is very slow, measured, and more concerned with making sense than being heard.

Of its consistency, then, the voice is out of place, as ideally it should be. But it is a voice that consequently struggles with rhythm and pause.<sup>65</sup> It is also a simple, childish voice, the voice of a convincing soothsayer, of the noble savage, in this land of lies. And how he falls in comparison to the smooth dulcitude of Frank Finlay's successor from up North:

Even though [White's] still, compelling presence gives him the *look* of a complete Othello, his broadly sketched performance makes him prey to McKellen's precise, transfixing Iago. Indeed their relationship reproduces the stereotypical opposition between instinctive, emotional 'natural' power attributable to the 'native' other and the intelligent, rational judgment of the

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<sup>61</sup> Anne Barton, 'Other places, other customs', in *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 September, 1989: 975.

<sup>62</sup> Harry Eyres, 'Power and Grandeur', in *The Times*, 28 August, 1989, Review: 33.

<sup>63</sup> John Peter, 'How to give a blind Moor new vision': C9.

<sup>64</sup> Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Othello: a contextual history*, p. 230.

<sup>65</sup> Marsha Hunt's Bianca, like White, has a foreign accent with regard to her colleagues on stage, creating (or just naturally?) a bizarre Cockney-Jamaican hybrid. She is also the most abused and subjected of all Biancas, her hair pulled as Iago drags her, bewildered, from Act Four. One must ask the pressing question whether she was thus depicted because Bianca was played by a black actress or because Bianca is a whore?

(civilized) colonizer – and is most clearly worked out in terms of the selective representation of performative bodies.<sup>66</sup>

Stanley Wells writes that ‘in Othello’s presence [McKellen’s Iago] was always under iron control, though his eyes narrowed to slits in intense concentration as he observed anything that might serve his purpose...McKellen’s insolent scorn extended even to the audience in his baleful, challenging gaze’.<sup>67</sup> This control extends to Iago’s power over the Moor as well. And so manifests a major difference between Iago and Othello who, in this company, and bereft of comparative ability, simply has no chance but to yield grandeur to frenzy, as Venice becomes Cyprus.

Nunn’s Cyprus is hot, full of invisible cicadas, home-made lemonade, and face-fans. This heat is pressing, claustrophobic. On arrival, the stormy weather contextualises the brief, deadly narrative. The childish delights continue though as the newly-arrived Othello immediately raises Desdemona up onto a trunk, the better to parade his prize. He circles her even as the garrison forms an outer ring around her; the camera swirls accordingly, Desdemona its sole object. All that this ‘love-on-show’ achieves, in tandem with producing a forthright male gaze, is further to equip Iago with the means to destabilise the Moor: ‘In White’s performance, Othello’s excess of goodwill – something he is just beginning to learn from Desdemona – *and* his insistence on trying to get that abundance into words delivers him to the narrower dimensions of the Iago view’.<sup>68</sup> That Iago view entails the need to push Othello further towards displays of spontaneous excitement, which apogee will be reached late in Act Three.

The director saves until the last moment the revelation of Othello’s gullibility, which one might argue works towards a favourable racial representation, at least not one showing, as did Miller’s, the Moor crumbling under immediate pressure. Nunn denotes White’s Moor behaviourally, by subduing the black man’s response to the barrage of provocation unleashed by Iago in the temptation scene. Suppressed for longer than any other Othello I have called upon, White’s righteous anger explodes into being with the same shock quotient as McKellen’s schizoid eruptions. He

<sup>66</sup> Barbara Hodgdon, ‘Race-ing Othello, Re-engendering White-Out’, p. 51.

<sup>67</sup> ‘Shakespeare Production in England in 1989’, in *Shakespeare Survey* 43 (1991): 194.

<sup>68</sup> H.R. Coursen, *Watching Shakespeare on Television*, p. 150.

laughs off Iago's 'look to your wife' (3.3.200), and it is only at 'set on thy wife to observe' (3.3.243), and then when Iago has left the stage, that Othello rips into messes the papers on his desk: 'Why did I marry?' (3.3.245). But this excitation should only be seen in the light of White's mediocrity in this company, his acting being 'the vulnerable point of the production...based on an old-fashioned grandeur, and culminat[ing] in theatrical rage'.<sup>69</sup>

The failure here lies in the maintenance of credible anger, for Othello's wrath moves quickly to a resigned slouch, almost self-indulgent, mumbling, approaching Eliot, giving credence to the idea of Othello's near delight in death as he finally escapes his linguistic shackles. In fact, White legitimizes Eliot's conviction, and it is this actor's instability that creates a paradoxically steady base for the proof. At '[t]his fellow's of exceeding honesty' (3.3.262), White stares straight to camera, an airy bewilderment suffusing his face. We are now fully inculcated, snared, for Iago tells us one thing to our faces and Othello quite another. Yet we are powerless to intervene, to intrude. Sixty lines on, White is traduced, a homicidal maniac delivers 'Avaunt, be gone, thou has't set me on the wrack' (3.3.338), and his fist-banging fit rivals Roderigo's earlier tantrums which lurched us back to his salad days. Now stepped in so far, Othello nearly strangles Iago – a powerful physical anger which we will see magnified by Oliver Parker – followed by a furniture fight and more neck grasping, all of which comes across as a total dislocation of reason.

The Moor returns sweating heavily for 'lie with her? lie on her?' (4.1.35). Following the fit – a slump to the ground and sixty seconds' stillness – White falls weeping into Iago's arms before snapping himself into irrational rage.<sup>70</sup> The slap is harder than ever imaginable, lifting Stubbs off the ground and spinning her into the dust. Switching to a psychologised violence when accusing his impudent strumpet of her crimes, he stands her on the table again, scene of her recent spectral worship, but this time in an empty room, he alone circling, hungry for prey. The camera fixes

<sup>69</sup> John Peter, 'How to give a blind Moor new vision': C9.

<sup>70</sup> In a trope to which *Othello* on film viewers become increasingly exposed, the Moor's doubling with Iago comes on 'I will be found most cunning in my patience' (4.1.91). Iago and Othello are held in a medium close-up two shot, eye-to-eye, a physical coalescence as a means of transferring the commitment to evil.

her again, mimics Othello's movements and, with its vulture's eye-view, awaits her death and a share of the carcass.

Othello appears for murder dressed, as was Robeson, in a ceremonial white kaftan, more a chief than a general. To match this grandstanding, Desdemona, in death, finally reaches fifth gear. Performed as 'the fierce resistance of a young life to extinction',<sup>71</sup> her slaughter is prefaced by desperation as she rages in her defence; Stubbs, to steal from the literary purse of one who steals from another, 'does not go gently into that good night'.<sup>72</sup> Her sharp, physical defiance necessitates an holistic, physical response from the Moor, who uses the occasion to exercise the Freudian staples of sex and death: 'For the murder...Othello smothered [Desdemona] orgasmically on a large bed, rolling off her unconscious body as if after sexual climax'.<sup>73</sup> The killing itself is wholesale disturbing theatre-cum-film, as White basically rapes his wife before strangling her. She has no response as her husband, like Steinbeck's Lenny from *Of Mice and Men*, shows nothing but mute, brute strength. And so Iago, who would have us believe in the irrationality, violence, and sexual derangement of black men, wins.

At the conclusion White is less than impressive. Up close, he looks grumpy, like a kid who has dropped his sweets in a puddle. The camera imprisons him as he weeps over Desdemona's dead body, a subjection which alerts H.R. Coursen, in that 'physicality is not necessarily a racial characteristic, but as Iago forces White more and more into the stereotypical "black man's persona," the camera dwells more and more on the agonized face of Othello and emphasizes therefore Othello's racial characteristics'.<sup>74</sup> Of Desdemona, by contrast, we see just a mop of fair hair.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Anne Barton, 'Other places, other customs', in *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 September, 1989: 975.

<sup>72</sup> Harry Eyres, 'Power and Grandeur', in *The Times*, 28 August, 1989, Review: 33.

<sup>73</sup> Stanley Wells, 'Shakespeare Production in England in 1989', in *Shakespeare Survey* 43 (1991): 192.

<sup>74</sup> *Watching Shakespeare on Television*, p. 148. Confusingly, after this illuminating point, Coursen goes on to determine that 'Nunn's camera simply notices skin pigmentation without, I believe, ever losing sight of the magnificent "visage"(1.3.274) [Arden, 1.3.253] that Desdemona glimpsed' (p. 148).

<sup>75</sup> In death, Zoe Wanamaker's Emilia joins hands with Desdemona. The camera looks straight at their wedding rings as their hands intertwine. This play is not a great advert for success in marriage and Nunn knows it.

Now the plangent stranger starts to grate with his sentimentality (*enter Eliot*) as White again slows his speech to precise, pendulous pentameters. With back to camera, he pulls a knife from under the mattress (has it been here all the time, even through their one night of bliss?). As the camera shifts to frontal, a full-on, ceremonial self-sacrifice takes place, with White plunging the dagger straight into his guts and dying with the same physical urgency with which he killed his wife.<sup>76</sup> Falling onto the mattress, he re-mounts Desdemona's dead bones, smothers her, kisses her and expires in a distasteful display of pseudo-necrophilia.

Nunn's closing shot is unique in the filmic canon for it is of Iago staring down at the tragic loading. Where Miller shielded our eyes from tragedy, Nunn mediates our emotion by placing Iago before us. We have already seen the bodies of Othello and Desdemona, now sanitised, side-by-side, pure in death, and as if but sleeping. Iago peers down at the bed like a wanton boy who has killed flies. Or, as H.R. Coursen puts it, '[a]t the end McKellen gazes on the deathbed, expressionless, pondering his own absence. The vacuum he creates forces us to ponder our involvement with this evil man and with his evil'.<sup>77</sup> This is the vacuum into which drifted Othello's music. And here, Iago, true to himself, is unmoving, uncomprehending, and responsible for something he will never fully understand.

The lighting fades on the other characters, coming only to top-light Iago's face which itself then slowly fades. This is the face that has dictated Shakespeare's exegesis, both for audience and actor alike: Iago the Determinator. In a final comment on Nunn, Barbara Hodgdon opens up a discussion which I will pursue in Parker's film: 'Those who might wish to claim that Nunn's *Othello* – a production with a black actor at its center – is not about race may be right, but not in the way they think. It is about who controls the narrative of racism'.<sup>78</sup> In Nunn's play, that control belongs to McKellen, for Nunn has allowed it to be so, and so it is fitting

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<sup>76</sup> That is White's response to the words 'smote him – thus!' (5.2.354) which, more than a figure of speech, is a multi-valenced stage direction offering great variety to the actor. We may recall Salvini's great ear-to-ear interpretation, Welles's embarrassed need 'thus' to withdraw, and Olivier's defiant, wrist-flicking, jugular stab.

<sup>77</sup> *Watching Shakespeare on Television*, p. 153.

<sup>78</sup> 'Race-ing Othello, Re-engendering White-Out', p. 55.

that he should conclude with a shot of the one symbol of wickedness that stoutly refuses to die.

The opening scene of Oliver Parker's 1995 *Othello* takes place on one of Venice's canals. An interpolated Desdemona is punted into long-shot in a gondola accompanied by an unidentified, black, male figure. As the craft swings into the foreground, her seated companion raises to his face a white mask and looks to camera, side-on. The boat docks, Irene Jacob's Desdemona disembarks and scampers through tenebrous colonnades. The black face is no longer part of the narrative. This one symbolic gesture serves both to reveal the film's dramatic genre (as the 'mask' of tragedy) and, crucially, with this explicit reference to Fanon's psychic masking, to state the race-fuelled grounds upon which the said genre is presented. This opening gambit, to our tired twenty-first-century eyes, is full of contention: 'Parker sacrifices the complexity of the play and most of its greatness to make it coherent for modern sensibilities'.<sup>79</sup> Coherent for modern cinematic lucre more like, for sensibilities are notoriously difficult to group, although if my own racial sensibilities are included here, then Parker's work coheres into a uniformly racist representation of the black body.

That opening shot would also have held particular relevance in the United States of America, where at the time of the film's release, national outpourings of racial wisdom and disdain accompanied the sensational trial of O.J. Simpson. Two years on, it was possible to muse upon the nature of the connection, as 'in many respects Parker's film represents an ideal post-O.J. *Othello* that functions as a performative instrument of culture somewhat analogous to Simpson's civil trial'.<sup>80</sup> That Barbara Hodgdon can align the two speaks as much for Parker's film and its presentation of the black body, as it does for a real-life, suspected double-murderer. The film was addressed with less finesse by other critics, who argue tangibly, nonetheless, that Parker's unuttered ideology succeeds only in 'ultimately revealing

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<sup>79</sup> Roger Ebert, 'Othello', in *Chicago Sun Times*, 29 December, 1995, [www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert\\_reviews/1995/12/1013460.html](http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/1995/12/1013460.html).

<sup>80</sup> Barbara Hodgdon, 'Race-ing Othello, Re-engendering White-Out', p. 65.

how apparently anti-racist readings are doomed to be racist'.<sup>81</sup> In failing one cause, Parker comes to support another; his film, indeed, 'in its use of a black actor in the title part, may be the most racist of all'.<sup>82</sup> Yet clearly, the casting – the enabling – of a black actor in a 'black' role can hardly be premised on an act of ideologised differentiation, on an act of racism. So what is going on? Finally, we see a black actor on our screens in a dedicated film of *Othello*. This is what we wanted, no?

The word *use* is the key. Cartmell's suggestion is of some greater power at work here, beyond the textual, beyond merely Shakespeare. It is not the film's *use* of Fishburne that sparks critical ire, but the purposes – the *use* – to which this actor and his Othello are subjected by a director who sits in his chair beneath the umbrella of cinema's white patriarchy. Parker's crime is, in part, to desecrate the black body, to experiment with his star's recognisability and profitability. The radical black feminist, bell hooks, has observed that 'in keeping with a colonizing mindset, with racial stereotypes, the bodies of black men and women become the location, the playing field, where white men work out their conflicts around freedom, their longing for transcendence'.<sup>83</sup> In terms of the film, this translates to Judith Buchanan's observation that Fishburne's 'colour, stature, bearing, earrings, unfamiliar gestures and half-mocking atmosphere make him less the supreme exemplum of Venice than an exotic misfit within it'.<sup>84</sup> Any resistance is crushed under the weight of the white gaze. Less 'Othello's visage in his mind' than the Other way round.

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<sup>81</sup> Deborah Cartmell, *Interpreting Shakespeare on Screen* (Macmillan Press, Basingstoke: 2000), p. 83.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>83</sup> *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representation* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 59. This work comprises a collection of cultural studies-oriented essays combining the author's many voices: 'academic talk, standard English, vernacular patois, the language of the streets'. hooks, who lives in the lower case, brings a distinct voice to bear through a coalescence of critiques of race, gender and sexuality, of 'celebrities' such as Madonna and Spike Lee, of Gangsta Rap, and of films such as *The Bodyguard* and *The Crying Game*. In assailing black and white critics of both polarities, she calls upon the disarming personal anecdote so as to empiricise her commitment to feminist politics. I will further call upon hooks' work in the conclusion to this thesis.

<sup>84</sup> 'Virgin and Ape, Venetian and Infidel: Labellings of Otherness in Oliver Parker's *Othello*', in *Shakespeare, Film, Fin-de-Siècle*, eds. Mark Thornton Burnett and Ramona Wray (London: Macmillan, 2000), p. 182.

It is, then, the dramatic exposure of this Othello's blackness that determines such an opinion.<sup>85</sup> Parker falls into what Cartmell calls the 'Hollywood racial trap' with its regressive, blind-eye approach towards racial difference. But Parker clearly does not factor in the power of the camera and its ability to work, surreptitiously, against the purported interests of the director. This omission blights Parker's attempt to free his Moor from clinging stereotype and only helps the clichés stick harder than ever.<sup>86</sup> An example of his lassitude comes at the start of Parker's evening of Bacchanalia. A party of soldiers plays 'come imbibe with me' – a college jock binge – and attends to the burning of a scarecrow which hangs over the fire. It is a lynching, redolent of the historically unpalatable South and a symbol of racial hatred, all engines running. But instead of asking us to see through the emblematic, to affirm its presence as decidedly anti-racist, Parker so ceases to inspire thoughts of radicality that one wonders whether this foretaste of the Moor's demise is a signal to prepare for and luxuriate in the spectacle of his collapse.

That the director should have had in mind an 'erotic thriller'<sup>87</sup> works, in its generic annunciation, to normalize both output and expectation, a point well made in one review of the film: 'Instead of sensing that Othello and Iago have become, in some profound way, mirror images of one another, the audience may well find itself worrying about more banal questions of black and white, and ethnic prejudice, while regretting the inexplicable breakdown of a promising inter-racial marriage'.<sup>88</sup> In yielding to banality, Parker's orthodoxy necessitates ease-of-access. Thus violence – a standard trope of white-on-black representation – comes to aid and abet the director's racial ideology. There is much conspicuous menace with which

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<sup>85</sup> As a further means of overt Othering, Parker uses the text immediately to privilege the dualising terms that distance Othello from his surroundings. Othello's opening line in this film, 'The goodness of the night upon you, friends' (Arden, 1.2.35), brings to the surface the textual polarities (and ambiguities) which are fair/dark, day/night, and white/black.

<sup>86</sup> As a (non-racial) example: The clap of thunder and bolt of lightning that accompany Iago's devilish 'Hell and Night' (1.3.401) are stale, curiously Gothic, and appear imported directly from Branagh's own *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (dir. Kenneth Branagh, Tristar Pictures, 1994).

<sup>87</sup> 'In promotional interviews for *Othello*, first-time director Oliver Parker called the play "an erotic thriller", and insisted that the previous screen adaptations had lacked passion'. See Daniel Rosenthal, *Shakespeare on Screen* (London: Hamlyn, 2000), p. 104.

<sup>88</sup> Robin Buss, 'When Moor is Less', in *Times Educational Supplement*, 23 February, 1996, sec. 2, p. 12. Richard Burt advances a unique viewpoint: 'Branagh plays Iago as a gay man who loves Othello but cannot admit it and so destroys him and his wife.' See *Unspeakable Shaxxspeares: Queer Theory & American Kiddy Culture* (New York: St Martins Press, 1998), p. 31.

Parker imbues his Moor, a man 'dangerously violent from the beginning'.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, one of the failings on perpetual show is Fishburne's inability to infuse Othello with enough humanity to displace the malingering aura of brutality that comes to control him: 'he pulls Montano by the hair (2.3.158), he threatens Emilia (Anne Patrick) with a sword against her neck (5.2.157)...he holds a pistol to Iago's chest (3.3.167); subsequently he hounds Iago...plunges him into the water, and holds his head under for a frighteningly long time, and he grabs him by the collar'.<sup>90</sup> Having struck Cassio's cheek when cashiering his Lieutenant, and already having had to stop himself from walloping Desdemona when demanding the absent handkerchief, Othello's slap to the wife's face, so much a measure of the pacing of Moorish wrath, comes as little surprise to Desdemona and fails to shock the audience, such is the ghetto-ized anger on constant show.<sup>91</sup>

Francesca Royster, with some relevance to my own work, proposes a discourse of pervasive violence as a nexus between Othello's past and present:

comparative analyses of productions, commentaries, criticisms, and so on that bridge the early modern and the postmodern demonstrate that the public reception of Ira Aldridge's nineteenth-century Othello and Lawrence Fishburne's 1995 Othello share a propensity to link black sexuality with violence. But while for Aldridge's audience this propensity for violence was what makes Othello 'natural,' authentic, and therefore knowable, for 1995 audiences Othello was sexy precisely because of the ways that he resisted being known or understood.<sup>92</sup>

One would think from the bridge that Royster builds from Aldridge to Fishburne that we had been given access to progress in black representation; that even though the performance of 'violence' proves to be an unfortunate temporal nexus, the black

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<sup>89</sup> Carol Chillington Rutter, 'Looking at Shakespeare's women on film', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*, p. 255.

<sup>90</sup> Patricia Tatzpaugh, 'The tragedies of love on film', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*, p. 149.

<sup>91</sup> Earlier, Fishburne played the wife-beating Ike Turner in the Tina Turner biopic *What's Love Got to Do with It?* (dir. Brian Gibson, Buena Vista Pictures, 1993), troping himself in ways recognizable to Shakespeare's Venetian stranger, wherein his 'affecting performance captured Ike's hot temper, shrewd insights, wildman talents, irrationality, assured masculinity...and surprising charm'. See Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 1994 [1973]), p. 364.

<sup>92</sup> Francesca Royster, 'The "End of Race" and the Future of Early Modern Cultural Studies', in *Shakespeare Studies* 26 (1998): 59.

body has come to project a sense of confusion; that 'culture' has erected a barrier to a white patriarchal understanding of black essentialism. But the performance-as-directed of Parker's protagonist yields little evidence for the defence. The film instead portends a dialogue with Fanon throughout as, beyond mere gratuitous violence, every one of Fanon's hackneyed standards is revealed in making the Moor fully known: 'Biology, penis, strong, athletic, potent'.<sup>93</sup>

Little is done to impugn the suggestion that 'no other play subjects its ostensibly tragic hero to so long and intensive a debunking before he even sets foot onstage. And the audience is inevitably complicit in this debunking'.<sup>94</sup> The perfidy of Iago and Roderigo aside, Fishburne's Moor comes also to be (visually) subjected to his audience in similar terms, for he is literally inscribed with his Otherness. Serpentine tattoos strafe his shaven head and he is amply ornamented. He is, for most of the film, all surface, all exteriority, all 'natural'.<sup>95</sup> Fishburne is robed in black during his opening sequence, the choice, I believe, hardly arbitrary. At key moments during the narrative, both Othello and Desdemona appear robed in either white or black, a signifier of the moment's syncretic lure. Barbara Hodgdon advises us further how this semiotic works: 'the ensuing midshots of Othello and Desdemona in the bed, showing her white breast and his black body, and a climactic emblematic shot of their two hands joined in close-up against white bed linens strewn with rose petals, feeds a white male viewer's potentially racist fantasies of miscegenation'.<sup>96</sup> The journalist's response is less complex and spot-on: 'We don't see much, but what we do see is enough to put you off sex with Shakespearean heroes for life'.<sup>97</sup> After bedding his wife, Othello descends from his chamber dressed in a white drape, looking for the world like a Roman fool in-waiting, a walking emblem of his conquering of Desdemona's sexual whiteness.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>93</sup> *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 166.

<sup>94</sup> Janet Adelman 'Iago's Alter Ego: Race as Projection in Othello', in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48 (1997): 125.

<sup>95</sup> To alert us to another of Fishburne's previous incarnations (Jason 'Furious' Styles in *Boyz n The Hood*, dir. John Singleton [Columbia Pictures, 1991]), the star wears an unlikely orange bandana during *Kendo* practice with Iago.

<sup>96</sup> 'Race-ing Othello, Re-engendering White-Out', p. 67.

<sup>97</sup> Tom Shone, 'Moor is Less': 6-7.

<sup>98</sup> Fishburne also bears beneath this sheet an enormous, priapic sword which seems possessed of its own sexual energy, forever taking half the toga along for the ride. As if I need to say, the imagery

Thus the director 'reduc[es] Othello's black identity to an appetizing and culturally acceptable icon: the athletic black male body'.<sup>99</sup> Barbara Hodgdon has expressed a kind of weariness at 'the myth of the black man as an icon of (regulated) performative violence in American... culture',<sup>100</sup> and yet here he is, re-mythologised. Toni Morrison's widely observed comment that 'in descriptions of black people, white discourse is often distinguishable from black discourse as it invariably refers to the person's body',<sup>101</sup> is afforded here, as elsewhere in this movie, considerable prominence. Not even critics of Shakespeare on film are immune to the traps in store: 'The Moor stands over the huge map of the Mediterranean, a dark god with a thick black scar on his bald scalp and the brand of slavery on his left palm. If he dominates this grand geography, it is by dint of a statue-like magnificence'.<sup>102</sup> As soon as Othello and Desdemona hit the bed-chamber, we are treated to a slow close-up into extreme close-up of Fishburne disrobing, the camera hugging the star's crotch like a thong, the overt sexualising of his blackness visually complete (although far from over), an embodiment of what Dymphna Callaghan calls 'the sexual potency of racial alterity'.<sup>103</sup>

In a production in which *faux* alterity prevails (and one would hope that Parker's efforts are unbidden and clumsy rather than intended) there are also, once again, insurmountable linguistic barriers to separate Othello from his entourage. In White's case, the opera singer's precision and West Indian orientation gave him a dumbed-down delivery with which to counter the brilliant wit of his adversary. By contrast, although no less diminishing, is Fishburne's timidity in 'tiptoeing fearfully

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screams 'Penis!' and restores to mind the titanic codpiece which Hopkins disported for our entertainment. 'The Negro', mused Fanon, 'is fixated at the genital; or at any rate he has been fixated there' (*Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 165).

<sup>99</sup> Royster (1998): 60.

<sup>100</sup> 'Race-ing Othello, Re-engendering White-Out', p. 41.

<sup>101</sup> 'Introduction: "Friday on the Potomac"', in *Race-ing Justice, Engendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas and the Construction of Social Reality*, ed. Toni Morrison (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p. xiv.

<sup>102</sup> H.R. Coursen, *Teaching Shakespeare with Film and Television*, (London: Greenwood Press: 1997), p. 125. 'When this film was shown at a school in Louisiana in February 1996, a white woman covered her eyes as Desdemona and Othello kissed. A young African American told me, "That's all he has to do. He doesn't have to say anything"' (p. 126).

<sup>103</sup> 'What's at Stake in Representing Race?', in *Shakespeare Studies*, Annual 1998, p. 21. 'Olivier gave him effrontery, Welles fury, Jones dignity. Fishburne now gives him sexuality'. See Alan Stone, 'Othello'. Originally published in the April/ May 1996 issue of *Boston Review*. Taken from <http://bostonreview.mit.edu/BR21.2/Stone.html>.

through his line readings, never quite putting a foot wrong, but never capable of any great leaps of tone'.<sup>104</sup> Another critic has Fishburne challenged and damned by his vernacular past: 'Physically, he is very impressive, exuding hearty sexual swagger, but Shakespeare's pentameters are alien to an actor who is more at home in the expletive-ridden world of 1990s thrillers like *King of New York*. Speaking in a bass, almost Caribbean accent, he sometimes rushes over his lines as though he is trying to spit out something extremely indigestible'.<sup>105</sup>

And then there is the Moor's inner mind at work, prominent for all its explicit fear of implicit adultery, for losing his gain. In a soft-porn implant by our cliché-conscious director, Othello envisions Desdemona in bed with Cassio. As Fishburne's Moor willingly searches within, demanding the mind's eye to provide the ocular proof, these inner pictorials tend towards the appalling lack of self-confidence wrought under colonialism. To extend this critique, James M. Welsh et al propose the director's commitment to genre Shakespeare: '[s]equences like this one suggest a parallel with MTV music videos, hinting at Parker's attempt to attract a younger audience to his film'.<sup>106</sup> In selling out, then, to a niche market, Parker delivers the legitimacy of Iago's 'I never found a man that knew how to love himself' (1.3.314-5), thereby aligning the lack of access to the truth with the fragmented Fanonian psyche. Far from giving us an Othello who remains 'unknown', Parker spells out loud and clear the many insidious, prevailing objections to negritude to the point that – and we that are young shall never see so much – '[t]he sexual fear and disgust that lie behind so much racial prejudice are exposed for our derisive expectations to fasten upon them'.<sup>107</sup>

The denouement is orchestrated by Iago, and comes as the summation of his constant manipulation of broadcast media. The text pays scrupulous attention to his

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<sup>104</sup> Tom Shone, 'Moor is Less': 6-7. Mick La Salle simply thought Fishburne's Moor 'lightweight, young and unseasoned'. See 'Film Does Less With Moor: *Othello* lacks Bard's passion', in *San Francisco Chronicle*, 2 August, 1996, <http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/1996/08/02/DD34929.html>.

<sup>105</sup> Daniel Rosenthal, 'Othello', in *Shakespeare on Screen*, pp. 104-5.

<sup>106</sup> James M. Welsh, Richard Vela, and John C. Tibbets, 'Othello', in *Shakespeare into Film* (New York: Checkmark Books, 2002), p. 70.

<sup>107</sup> G.K. Hunter, 'Othello and Colour Prejudice'[1967], in *Dramatic Identities and Cultural Tradition: Studies in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Liverpool, Liverpool University Press: 1978), p. 45.

on-going management of his master: '[I]f the film's take on how race matters is most acutely realized through performative bodies, racist ideologies become even more visible in the discourses surrounding it, where, Iago-like, they monitor, interpret, and (at times) punish Othello's performance'.<sup>108</sup> Combine this with the director's choice to allow Iago to control the camera, and we see Parker gift racism its chance to destroy by disempowering the emancipated gaze.

The troping of control which was adduced by both Miller and Nunn, here comes literally to smother the narrative as Branagh creates a near-permanent interaction with the viewer, distilling our unease by addressing us with it directly. To our faces, he asks us 'How? How?' (1.3.393) he should dispose of Othello. This Machiavel adores the attention and as he advises us head-on of Desdemona's helplessness – 'So will I turn her virtue into pitch' (2.3.355) – he grasps a burning ember in his palm, understandably winces, and blacks his hand up with the ashes that remain.<sup>109</sup> Here, Iago, for all his glorious egomania, constructs a powerful 'DON'T look at me!' moment. Time-wise it is a flash, but for the sake of centuries of blindness no sense of time can be attached to it: Iago stops us seeing; he plucks our vile jellies while we sit, unmoving. He covers the camera, and our eyes, with his 'smirched' hand. As with his master, so too Iago ensures our silence, our submission and our obeisance. We can again recall the ever-relevant G.K. Hunter, who argues that Shakespeare's stereotypical representation of Othello is commandeered, to considerable detriment, by the evil ensign: 'Shakespeare has presented to us a traditional view of what Moors are like, i.e. gross, disgusting, inferior, carrying the symbol of their damnation on their skin; and has caught our over-easy assent to such assumptions in the grip of a guilt which associates us and our assent with the white man representative of such views in the play – Iago'.<sup>110</sup>

There is no sunny-side up for the over-easy here. Although of course it is Othello who asks the Cassio 'death sentence' question, '[d]id he confess it?' (4.1.64), Iago looks to us, to his audience, as if waiting for 'one of the responses

<sup>108</sup> Barbara Hodgdon, 'Race-ing Othello, Re-engendering White-Out', p. 41.

<sup>109</sup> The black 'painted' onto white diametrically opposes Olivier's leaking blackness onto Maggie Smith's white cheek.

<sup>110</sup> *Dramatic Identities and Cultural Tradition: Studies in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, p. 45.

that Iago can command, not only of people on the stage but also in the audience'.<sup>111</sup> We are drawn in and once again left powerless to argue, to offer up the truth. In remaining silent, we yield to the power of discrimination and open up our own consciences to Iago's wicked architecture. 'Demand me nothing. What you know you know. From this time forth I never will speak word' (5.2.300-301). As with the defiant look – the look that says 'this is what you wanted, no?' – that Branagh throws at the camera from the carnage on the bed, Iago has sealed shut our eyes and now our voices are hushed, complicitly. I do not agree that, as he lies bleeding, Iago's fleeting glimpse is '[n]o longer...the look of a man in control, a man whose intimate and knowing glances have encouraged the spectator into a complicity with his own vicious designs. He has now been diminished and objectified'.<sup>112</sup> We find our nexus in Barbara Hodgdon's articulate, political interjection into the debate:

If the image of the 'loaded bed' is what marks the limits of Othello-as-entertainment, the point at which spectators chastise themselves for sharing Iago's voyeuristic pleasure, Parker's film represents that bed, to which Iago crawls, curling his body into the tableau as its 'director,' if not its author, as his ultimate artistic creation, the conclusive 'ocular proof' of the perversely racialized, misogynistic imaginary that, in the wake of Simpson's trial, split one nation into two.<sup>113</sup>

This is the man who, like Iago Hoskins and Iago McKellen before him, continues to control this movie's 'womb of time'. He who masters the camera speaks for the audience and not once does this Iago lose control. And he knows that we cannot deny having a hand in the 'tragic loading of this bed' that Lodovico assigns to Iago's 'work' (5.2.364-5). Iago remains as powerful – as enfranchised – as he has been throughout the play; he offers up to us a look – neither diminished nor objectified – that begs our acknowledgement.

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>112</sup> Judith Buchanan, 'Virgin and Ape, Venetian and Infidel: Labellings of Otherness in Oliver Parker's *Othello*', p. 187.

<sup>113</sup> 'Race-ing Othello, Re-engendering White-Out', p. 73.

As a way of strengthening the binds between these productions, I can further utilise Roger Ebert's review of Oliver Parker's *Othello*, which in fact looks back at and speaks for his immediate predecessors:

Those are the human emotional engines that drive Shakespeare's play and that have made it so powerful for so many different audiences for so many years. They are at risk in any modern production, where the fact that Othello is black and Desdemona white is likely to cast a longer shadow than it did in Shakespeare's time... To some degree, any modern production must make Iago the villain and Othello the victim, and suffer as a result.<sup>114</sup>

What these three productions have revealed is the propensity, in a decade-and-a-half, to protect and maintain erroneous (yet stable), white liberal notions of blackness. A necessary stimulant to this has been through gifting a new, lens-specific dominance to Iago, along with the consequent expectation that Moorish flaws (and here read 'human' flaws) will fall from prominence. Correspondingly, then, we have seen within these films a rise in Iago's star, as the machinery of evil unbound is given increasing access to the camera for personal interventions.

Where television was used for a single, experimental purpose by Burge and Olivier, we have now in two productions seen television as a professional medium, one off-shoot of which is Iago's committed sequestration of the camera's gaze. Within these productions, somewhat illogically, there appears to be a correlation between the downplaying of racial texts and contexts and the empowering of hatred's chief propagator. The common denominator is the transition that has taken place from Iago as contained by the camera to Iago as himself a containing and determining visual force, which oppressive paradigm is set in stone by Oliver Parker's supposedly assured step away from television into the murky market of film. Such is Parker's basic approach to black skin that Roger Ebert can offer such a synoptic yet valid synopsis of the film: 'Many people seeing this film will read it as the story of a jealous black man who wins but cannot trust his white wife, and so kills her. There is a lot more to it than that'.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>114</sup> 'Othello', in *Chicago Sun Times*, 29 December, 1995, at [www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert\\_reviews/1995/12/1013460.html](http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/1995/12/1013460.html).

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., [www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert\\_reviews/1995/12/1013460.html](http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/1995/12/1013460.html).

As I have argued, a de-stabilising corollary of handing Iago the fullest malignant licence comes with the lack of attention to Othello's own racialisation, and the need to create an organic, defensible whole in relation to both immediate context and considered critique. As I move towards the modernisation of Othello, towards the displacement of Shakespeare's language while searching for a valid, black essence, one of this period's critics gives me a segue into my concluding chapter:

Why have American underwriters committed themselves to a six-year demonstration of orthodox anglophilia?... we have our own traditions of playing Shakespeare that are strikingly different from the BBC's official and authorised version. We have our own Shakespeare that is closer to the slangy and raucous poetry of Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammet, and the American film noir... We should remember that besides the British Shakespeare there is a universal Shakespeare that is cut loose from the author's roots in an English-speaking culture that he could not possibly have anticipated in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.<sup>116</sup>

In lamenting the failure of the Anglo-American Shakespeare, Charney looks forward to a different, totalising bard who speaks in an American vernacular. This is precisely the point of departure for my conclusion to this thesis, as the two final versions of *Othello*, which only exist through patois, arrive on our screens.

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<sup>116</sup> Maurice Charney, 'Shakespearean Anglophilia: The BBC-TV Series and American Audiences', in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 31 (1980): 292. Those underwriters were the Exxon Corporation, Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, Morgan Guaranty Trust Company of New York, and WNET 13 in New York City.

**Conclusion**  
**Slam-Dunking the Deoxyribonucleic Proof:**  
**'Nothello' and the New Millennium**

In order to conclude this thesis it is necessary for me, paradoxically, to move further away from Shakespeare in order to get closer to his Venetian Moor. The two final versions of the play that I will critique are the most recently produced films of the play and are, perhaps unsurprisingly, explosive simulations, statements of contemporary, cutting-edge appropriation and representation, of *Othello* performed not before the court, but on the court and in the courts, of North Carolina<sup>1</sup> and London. The Moors in question are a basketball whiz and a top policeman, while the polemics that arise from these movies could not be more starkly contrasted. Each film rewrites early modern English into non-descript (and therefore highly observable) Home Counties- and teen preppy- speak, substantiating Stanley Wells's observation that the 'translation of Shakespeare to a different medium requires, and justifies, free treatment of the text'.<sup>2</sup>

With regard to appropriation, Deborah Cartmell has observed somewhat stodgily that 'success is achieved not by rubbishing but by revering the original; the successful adaptation must make clear that it is – and can only be – a pale version of the Shakespearean text'.<sup>3</sup> Although she does not qualify 'success', or explain precisely why such a tugging of the forelocks must take place, she does alert us to the notion of representational verisimilitude – specifically political acts in the two films to come – and of debt-paying, so as to embellish the credentials of both the present product and its originator.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A state with a disturbing civil rights record, and thus a citation of the plays' systemic oppression.

<sup>2</sup> 'Television Shakespeare', in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 33 (1982): 266. In this regard, *Ten Things I Hate About You* (dir. Gil Junger, Touchstone, 1999) set something of a *fin-de-siècle* standard, repositioning *The Taming of the Shrew* to a high school in Anytown, USA and enabling a modern, vulgar response to the pentameter. See Richard Burt, 'Teen Things I Hate about Girlene Shakesploitation Movies in the Late 1990s, or Not-So-Fast Times at Shakespeare High', in *Spectacular Shakespeare: Critical Theory and Popular Cinema*, eds. Courtney Lehmann and Lisa S. Starks (London: Associated University Presses, 2002), pp. 205-32.

<sup>3</sup> 'The Shakespeare on Screen Industry', in *Adaptations: From text to screen, screen to text*, eds. Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 29-30.

<sup>4</sup> For an enjoyable article on this issue in the cinematic, as opposed to Shakespearean, press, see Gary Crowds, 'Words, words, words: recent Shakespearean films', *Cineaste* 23.4 (1998): 13-19.

A less worshipful Richard Finkelstein sees the democratic, people-oriented nature of our late twentieth-century trans-textual desires in that 'appropriation helps to standardize desire by giving people the market standards they demand'.<sup>5</sup> That two mainstream takes on *Othello* should, uniquely, appear in the same year suggests that the complexities of Shakespeare's challenging groundwork maintain a strong socio-cultural viability; its transplantation to our screens in our time appears inevitable: 'There are certain stories we cannot resist telling and retelling as a culture, altering the terms slightly, but retaining the fundamental structure of the narrative... *Othello* has become such a tale, retold by the media, political leaders, and frequently invoked to conjure visual representations of a taboo image... the violent black man contrasted to a passive white female victim'.<sup>6</sup>

Where Andrew Davies, the screenwriter for the ITV *Othello* of 2001,<sup>7</sup> takes his violent black man face-to-face with race and racism, calling upon the depressing contents of the Macpherson report for contextualization,<sup>8</sup> Brad Kaaya, the creator of '*O*',<sup>9</sup> tries to deny racial difference and, using basketball as his agency for exposing blackness, subsequently falls into a succession of bland black physical stereotypes not entirely inconsistent with the racialising tropes that Oliver Parker misdirected towards Laurence Fishburne. This is in spite of the fact that in his set pieces the American remains far more faithful to Marguerite Rippey's 'fundamental structure' although, as Peter Bradshaw has noted, returning us to grateful legatees of Shakespeare: 'perhaps overaware of its solemn literary inheritance, [*O*] tiptoes

<sup>5</sup> 'Disney cites Shakespeare: The Limits of Appropriation', in *Shakespeare and Appropriation*, eds. Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 194. Finkelstein here helps recall Oliver Parker's guiding motivation.

<sup>6</sup> Marguerite Hailey Rippey, 'All our Othellos: Black Monsters and White Masks on the American Screen', in *Spectacular Shakespeare: Critical Theory and Popular Cinema*, pp. 26-7.

<sup>7</sup> *Othello*, dir. Geoffrey Sax (LWT/WGBH/CBC Production, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> The report was commissioned by the Home Secretary after the disastrous police investigation into the race murder of an 18 year-old black, London student, Stephen Lawrence. I will develop this nexus in my critique.

<sup>9</sup> '*O*' dir. Tim Blake Nelson (Lions Gate Entertainment, 2001). A good reason to purchase this DVD lies in the addition of the Buchowetski *Othello* (1922) on the supplementary disc. What is remarkable about *O* is that its release was delayed for two years by the 1999 Columbine school shootings in Colorado. The censors, while having no problem *per se* with the representation of another multiple shooting in an American school, thought it was too closely situated to reality. This proves to be a fascinating moment in which Shakespeare could justifiably claim to have met the censors, but for violence instead of race.

around sex and race, and, in turning Shakespeare's grown-ups into *Dawson's Creek* teens, jettisons much of the original's grandeur'.<sup>10</sup>

What grandeur remains comes from Odin James (Mekhi Phifer), apparently named after the white, Norse god of slam-dunks, who is the chief playmaker of the 'Palmetto Grove' Hawks, the basketball team of this exclusive North Carolinian boy's academy.<sup>11</sup> This powerful young man has had a mixed ascent from a deprived background: he has some previous for drugs, yet was effectively head-hunted by the team's coach, Duke Goulding (Martin Sheen).<sup>12</sup> Odin is also the lover of 'Dean' Brable's daughter, Desi (Julia Styles), and the only black boy at the school, an extravagant stranger in terms of both class and race whose integration into the whitened, privileged mainstream comes not through the militaristic but as a result of sporting excellence. To his schoolmates, he is a combination of reality and myth, an outsider in ways both seen and suspected; and, significantly, the moment of his symbolic acceptance, in a rhetorical flood, into the white patriarchy's schematics is the moment of his nemesis's empowerment. James Welsh et al comment that 'language was the scaffolding upon which Shakespeare erected his improbable set of characters with their equally improbable motivations and behaviours. But without that glorious linguistic superstructure, can this prefab movie long endure?'<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 13 September, 2002, <http://film.guardian.co.uk>.

<sup>11</sup> The name 'Odin' stands out less for the connection's intended potency than for the total racial disjunction it instantiates. The contracted 'O', however, has multiple applications here, with the shape of a basketball, Shakespeare's 'wooden O' from *Henry V's* Chorus, Othello's 'O Desdemona!...O! O!' (5.2.279), and a full turning of the dramatic wheel of fortune, all implicated. Daniel Vitkus probes the contraction, albeit with no connection to this film, in 'The "O" in *Othello*: Tropes of Damnation and Nothingness', in *New Critical Essays on Othello*, ed. Philip C. Kolin (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 347-62.

<sup>12</sup> Sheen plays the coach with standard, tough-love paternalism; veins pop in his forehead at every 'three-pointer against'. I am reminded of a *Saturday Night Live* skit from the mid-eighties in which Jim Belushi played 'The High School Chess Coach' who screams 'Nooooo! Bishop to Queen Five!' and hurls tables at his teen protégés, who practice their chess while seated in the middle of a basketball court. Sheen would not have been out of place here.

<sup>13</sup> James M. Welsh, Richard Vela, and John C. Tibbets, eds., *Shakespeare into Film* (New York: Checkmark Books, 2002), p. 70. According to [imdb.com](http://imdb.com), *O's* budget was \$5 million, the film returned nearly \$7 million on its opening weekend – the second highest grossing weekend opening for a Lion's Gate film – and, according to the latest published data, had achieved over \$16 million in ticket sales at 4 November, 2001. In terms of studio revenues, the film is incredibly successful.

Well yes it can, and will: the Academy will see to that; but not for linguistic reasons.<sup>14</sup> Othello's powerbase is a freedom with words that stood in contradiction to his increasingly circumscribed liberty. Odin, on the other hand, 'has no way to articulate his thoughts and feelings except through physical violence and self-destructive behavior. At best, he seems pitiable; at worst, dumb and brutal—in other words, closer to a black stereotype than the filmmakers could possibly want him to be'.<sup>15</sup> At times of such disempowerment the film jars awkwardly with black power politics, for Odin's disenfranchisement is at the hands of the white patriarchy: 'The modern Black diaspora problematic of invisibility and namelessness can be understood as the condition of *relative lack of Black power to present themselves and others as complex human beings, and thereby to contest the bombardment of negative, degrading stereotypes put forward by white supremacist ideologies*'.<sup>16</sup> In spite of the impressive physical energy performed by Odin, the mono-dimensionality of his scripted responses to his sport's/state's oppression hold in abeyance thoughts of an emancipated, black subject.

Perhaps more importantly, what both 'O' and Sax's *Othello* have in close common bond with Shakespeare is their perpetuation of his dramatic agenda for exploring the outsider: one who is subject to the multivalent frameworks of an oppressive hierarchy and who both triumphs and falls in his attempts to integrate and normalize himself to the socio-cultural demands of this hierarchy. What Shakespeare did was to certify an idea; Andrew Davies and Brad Kaaya pointedly spurn linguistic debt but fully embrace and pictorialise the politics of Shakespeare's racial awareness. In another 'visibility' dialogue, one that figuratively tracks Othello's own inclusion/exclusion dialectic, Richard Burt notes that

the practice of moving Shakespeare from high-culture icon to mass-culture referent coincides with the mediatization of race itself as a performance in black popular culture and with a recognition that a critique of race based on

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<sup>14</sup> Cassio's (Mike's) de-commissioning, for example, is a two-game suspension, and as for his dwindling kudos, we get Hugo's 'who gives a fuck about reputation?' to replace Iago's 'reputation is an idle and most false imposition, oft got without merit and lost without deserving' (2.3.264-6).

<sup>15</sup> Amy Taubin 'Character Flaws', in *Village Voice*, 29 August – 4 September, 2001, [www.villagevoice.com/issues/0135/taubin.php](http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0135/taubin.php).

<sup>16</sup> Cornel West, 'The New Cultural Politics of Difference', in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. S. During (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 210. Author's italics.

exclusion from visibility and representation is useless. Visibility does not mean empowerment; gaining a voice does not necessarily mean liberation, especially when speech is compelled or coerced; cultural representation does not mean political emancipation or inclusion.<sup>17</sup>

That the sport in question *is* basketball, a largely black sport run by large white men, directs critical attention to *Hoop Dreams*, Steve James's 1994 documentary which tracks the aspirations of two young African Americans who, like Odin, seek their own emancipation, and are likewise recruited into a prestigious high school basketball team.<sup>18</sup> Taking the opportunity to comment on the exploitative white patriarchy's approach to blacks in American sport, bell hooks recalls 'reviewers like David Denby in *New York* magazine [who] proclaim that *Hoop Dreams* is an "extraordinary detailed and emotionally satisfying piece of work about American inner-city life, American hopes, American defeat"'. Such a comment, she retorts, 'seems highly ironic given the reality that it is precisely the way in which institutionalized racism and white supremacist attitudes in everyday American life actively prohibit black male participation in diverse cultural arenas and spheres of employment while presenting sports as the 'one' location where recognition, success, and material reward can be attained'.<sup>19</sup>

What pushes *O* tendentially towards these unsatisfactory paradigms lies in the presentation of sport's destructive capabilities, as played out, and by, the film's black hero. Complicit in Odin's demise is Russell Lee Fine's cinematography, which works to empower Hugo (Iago/Josh Hartnett) while denying equal status to the subject of his manipulation, as 'the camera lets us see Odin from Hugo's vantage point – swaggering, beaming, arrogant. Odin is a loyal friend, but the movie makes it clear exactly how Hugo might get sick of contemplating the glory of Odin on a daily basis'.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> 'Slammin' Shakespeare In Acc(id)ents Yet Unknown: Liveness, Cinem(edi)a, and Racial Dis-integration', in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 53 (2002): 206.

<sup>18</sup> Fine Line Features, 1994. The film received a stack of critic's circle awards and was nominated for an Academy Award (Best Film Editing) in 1995.

<sup>19</sup> 'neo-colonial fantasies of conquest: *Hoop Dreams*', in *reel to real: race, sex, and class at the movies* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 79.

<sup>20</sup> Mick LaSalle, 'High school *Othello*: Compelling drama recasts Shakespeare's tragedy on a basketball court', in *San Francisco Chronicle*, 31 August, <http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2001/08/31/DD69754.DTL>.

The source of this Iago's wrath comes with his recognition of his own mediocrity in the face of stardom and, as I have discussed, in his father's award-ceremony acceptance of Odin – 'I love him like my own son' – to the humiliation of his real son, Hugo, also in the audience. Charles Taylor writes that 'with that pop-psych explanation, the O of the title could have easily stood for "Oprah"'.<sup>21</sup> Not only is the film marred by such sappy sentimentality by also the camera's adoration of the performative black body, either on the court where it tracks Odin with frenzied cross-cutting, or in the sack with languorous, near static scopophilia, both of which come to reinscribe stereotype onto blackness, an unchecked politics of representation which invokes the ire of black commentators: 'more than any group white men are able to make films without being subjected to a constant demand that their work not perpetuate systems of domination based on race... As a consequence it is this work that is usually the most unthinking and careless in its depictions of groups that are marginalized by these institutionalized structures of exploitation and oppression'.<sup>22</sup>

The camera is guilty of domination off-court too. Considerable time is given over to the physical love between Odin and Desi, which congress is virtually absented by Shakespeare.<sup>23</sup> Their relationship is observed almost exclusively in close-up, with otherwise banal shots of, say, her arm caressing his naked back, as a means of miscegenating the screen and inviting scopic disapprobation. Like Shakespeare, and as part of his on-going disruption of this mixed relationship, Hugo calls upon the trope of white, female infidelity: 'Time and again, we see that Hugo succeeds in his evildoing at least partially because he's able to play on Odin's worst suspicions about his white girlfriend, and Michael's barely camouflaged attitudes about his black teammate'.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Charles Taylor, 'O', 31 August, 2001, [www.salon.com](http://www.salon.com).

<sup>22</sup> bell hooks, 'artistic integrity', in *reel to reel: race, sex, and class at the movies*, p. 70.

<sup>23</sup> On one such occasion, Odin and Desi have a token bed-time conversation ('Race 101') about why black folk can say the N-word but not white. For the more academically minded, Randall Kennedy has produced a stimulating monograph on the etymology and sociology of the word in *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003).

<sup>24</sup> Joe Leydon, "'O" brother: Sexual envy? Professional jealousy? Repressed homosexuality? All of the above?', in *San Francisco Examiner*, 29 July, 2001, [www.examiner.com](http://www.examiner.com).

That Michael should be a closet racist instantiates a further exegetic diversion from the source. A dangerous Cassio is an advance on Shakespeare which Andrew Davies follows too, as his 'Michael Cass' makes his desire for Desdemona perfectly clear to her and us. Odin's friend Mike has shown no negrophobia until his 'Nigger!' detonation in the locker room, in the film's equivalent to the listening scene at Act Four, Scene One. This very lack makes the revelation insidious yet overwhelmingly pure, a spontaneous explosive antipathy in the mind of a white, American Everyman. Mike's wrath is a fine effacement of hidden angst, and it subsides as it arose; yet the word hangs in the air long enough for the secreted Odin to realise that the silent liberal centre is his greatest foe.<sup>25</sup> Such impressive instances aside, this proves to be the case for the filmmakers too who, while never substantiating the need for Mike's taboo epitaph, deliver us from sympathy by producing a recognizable, physically-explosive, black hero. The basketball court is Odin's manor. As I have said, the camera obliges his dominion with rapid action sequences and dolly shots that privilege black success through physical superiority and might, evincing a literal black ascent over relative, white stasis.

As a means of supplementing the play's black/white dialectic, much is made of hawks and doves, a dominant visual theme in this film, the black predator off-set against supposed white passivity. A number of times we see cooing doves or circling hawks projected onto the screen. Hugo, with a permanent, attributive hole to fill when placed against Odin, has always wanted to be a hawk, so he tells us in the opening voice-over, 'to fly, free, above everyone else'. But he remains his black friend's 'chronically overshadowed teammate',<sup>26</sup> whose relationship with 'Emily' (Rain Phoenix) is asexual, in contrast to Odin and Desi who appear to be the only sexually-active teenagers at this school, which imagery instills itself within the director's ideology: 'Odin, like Othello, has to be black, but the point of both narratives isn't to demonstrate the murderous jealousy lurking within black men

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<sup>25</sup> 'Since liberals often argue that other people's racism is all the more dangerous for being unconscious, one might expect them to be the first to suspect and uncover their own. But instead of uncovering it, liberal institutions such as the Ford and other foundations fund it; activists and politicians pander to it; and the *New York Times* and other media disseminate its view of the world'. See Jim Sleeper, *Liberal Racism* (New York: Viking, 1997), pp. 4-5.

<sup>26</sup> Joe Leydon, "'O" brother: Sexual envy? Professional jealousy? Repressed homosexuality? All of the above?', in *San Francisco Examiner*, 29 July, 2001, [www.examiner.com](http://www.examiner.com).

involved with white women, but rather to show the impact (at a certain level) that an envious and territorial culture might have on an 'other' who has managed to infiltrate it'.<sup>27</sup>

Odin's infiltration is given graphic resonance in the scene in which he and Desi elope to 'The Willows' Hotel',<sup>28</sup> where Desi declares that she wants him to 'have' her, however he wants. Cue the camera's love affair with the mixing of flesh; cue the black man's desire to punish the white woman. During sexual intercourse, Odin looks into the bedside mirror and sees the face of Mike reflected back, the white mask in place, whereupon Odin proceeds to rape Desi. She screams for him to stop, she is clearly in pain; we do not know whether he sodomizes her but the agony which she conveys suggests the possibility.<sup>29</sup> It is a transgression of the most offensive kind, one which rekindles white fear of black invasion/perversion, yet one which should not surprise us: 'In popular [white] culture, representations of black masculinity equate it with brute phallogentrism, woman-hating, a pugilistic "rapist" sexuality, and flagrant disregard for individual rights'.<sup>30</sup> And this is where the film yields up its good work and spurns to be more creative, moving instead to fill boxes, to requite what bell hooks calls a 'dick-thing' masculinity,<sup>31</sup> thereby placating reactionary politics:

Since there is little public discussion about the way in which existing popular representations of black masculinity serve to reinforce and sustain existing structures of domination, these images are reproduced again and again. Countered primarily by mainstream constructions of the conventional racist/sexist stereotype of the black male as bestial primitive destroyer, these images work together to censor and suppress any complex representation of black masculinity.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> 'Tim Blake Nelson's notes on "O"' at Cinema Confidential, <http://www.cinecon.com/news.php?id=0108139>. Notwithstanding the misrepresented politics of his film, Blake Nelson comes across as an unusually articulate and thoughtful cog in the Hollywood mainstream.

<sup>28</sup> Which nudges us back to Desdemona's approaching sacrifice.

<sup>29</sup> Amy Taubin refers to this moment as Odin 'hate-fucks Desi' ('Character Flaws').

<sup>30</sup> bell hooks, 'Reconstructing Black Masculinity', in *Black Looks: race and representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), p. 102.

<sup>31</sup> See *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representation*, p. 110.

<sup>32</sup> 'doing it for daddy: black masculinity in the mainstream', in *reel to real: race, sex, and class at the movies*, p. 90.

No less destructive is the film's key set-piece, the annual Slam-Dunk competition. Perplex'd in the extreme, Odin finds a 'brother' drug dealer who obliges his now deluded ambition by powdering his nose. Wrought enough to yield his natural body to proscribed enhancers, his is the spectacle of the black man pumped on drugs in an attempt to satisfy the white patriarchy. The fuelled Odin's ultimate act of transgression is to smash (to 'spider') the glass back-board with the mother-of-all-dunks, signifying the unraveling of rationality and the end of this man's hoop dreams. All hell indeed breaks loose: Odin is convinced of Desi's infidelity with Mike and agrees to strangle her. Meanwhile, the 'Roger' side-plot goes badly wrong: Roger shoots Mike in the leg; Hugo shoots Roger in the stomach. Hugo will dispose of 'Em' in the same way before condemning himself to eternal silence and a ride downtown.

Odin's final speech is localized – 'Tell them about the Nigger that lost it back in High School!...My mother wasn't a crack whore!...You tell them I loved that girl!' – and he shoots himself in the heart. Cue sirens, body bags, armies of counselors. At the moment of his death the camera freezes on him, a crack of white light and the pistol's discharge caught in a still that overwhelms the screen, locking in an instant the spectacle of black transgression and social recompense.

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The quandary that lies between an apparently static source and the modern appetite for adaptation is similarly contested, to greater effect, in Geoffrey Sax's repositioning of the Moor. This dialectic is well defined by Giddings et al:

We look back to the past as travelers on a journey look back to the way they have come. If we modernize those staging-posts along our journey to our way of thinking, it is in a sense a way of admitting they are no longer appropriate or relevant in their original form to speak to us of the twentieth century. If we slavishly endeavour to relocate them as we think they might have appeared in their own time, we produce a fake antique.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> R. Giddings, K. Selby, and C. Wensley, *Screening the Novel: The theory and practice of literary dramatization* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), p. 34.

We might see this recent ITV production as countering its rival, in the form of the BBC Shakespeare series' collection of fake antiques, which dramatized facsimiles of early modern theatrical discourse led critics to accuse the Corporation of an agenda-based, hegemonic vision, as a consequence of which 'Shakespeare can become a strain in the multivocal and pluralistic polyphony of a democratic culture'.<sup>34</sup> Under Sax's direction, Othello's music is restored to 'the people's score' through wholesale linguistic appropriation; democratic assuagement is assured by presenting the viewer with an outsider who faces the alternative, specific hegemony of contemporary racism within the criminal justice system he comes to command.

The current Commissioner, Sinclair Carver (Bill Patterson), is taped in a swank hotel bathroom telling Christopher Eccleston's Jago that they would have no problem with the black community if only 'their brains were as big as their dicks'.<sup>35</sup> Carver is ousted from his job which goes not to the expectant Jago but to John Othello who has just single-handedly quelled a race riot – Shakespeare's Cypriot storm – by addressing his simmering 'people' from the steps of Scotland Yard (admittedly, not an entirely credible sequence). The riot erupted after four white police kicked to death a black petty crook in his council house on a run-down London estate.

In a concession to the type of political correctness that opposes progress, the Prime Minister decides that the time is ripe to present to the country an image of black success so as to placate the ethnic tension that fattens this key sub-plot,<sup>36</sup> predicated upon a police beating, *à la* Rodney King, and what has come to be interred in contemporary racial discourse as 'institutional racism',<sup>37</sup> after the

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<sup>34</sup> Graham Holderness, 'Bard on the Box (1985, 1988)', in *Visual Shakespeare: Essays in Film and Television* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2002), p. 31.

<sup>35</sup> The surveillance is not credited to Jago but we are, I think, asked to believe that his presence was no mere coincidence.

<sup>36</sup> 'He's a black man in the right position at just the right time. And they think, let's do it. It might be a good idea for its own sake. But perhaps they're more concerned with how it will play in the media. I suppose I'm having a little dig at the way not just the British government but most governments work these days' ('An Interview with Andrew Davies', [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/othello/ei\\_davies.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/othello/ei_davies.html)).

<sup>37</sup> 'The collective failure of an organization to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes, and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance,

enquiry into the 1993 murder of black London teenager, Stephen Lawrence.<sup>38</sup> Enter Othello on a wave of political opportunism, Britain's first affirmatively-acted police chief. By way of celebrating the unexpected announcement, Jago jokingly calls his new boss a 'clever, big, black bastard', throws his arms around him, and looks straight to camera as he hugs the back he longs to stab.

The Anglo-Nigerian novelist, Ben Okri, aligns Iago's *faux* warmth and personableness with Othello's downfall, which is nowhere more apparent than under Sax's direction: 'Of all the people in the play, with the natural exception of Desdemona, Iago is the only one who expresses what he feels for Othello. He is lying, but nonetheless he expresses. It means a lot to the isolated to have someone declare their affection. It means a lot to be loved'.<sup>39</sup> Lest we forget, John Othello has just taken over one of the country's largest wings of oppressive state hegemony from a racist incumbent with many, hidden, racist underlings. Sax's direction brings out with considerable clarity Othello's professional isolation, using Jago as a super-tactile, intimate confidant, the *ne plus ultra* of police integrity.

We are asked to believe that Jago's racism is realized instantly, that it lives only between the programme's bookending credits. He is, to his creator, 'somebody who never thought he was prejudiced or had any sort of racial hatred...it's only after Othello gets promoted over his head, into a position that he thought he should have, that Jago discovers he does have racial feelings after all'.<sup>40</sup> Such a characterisation is impossible to off-set against Iago, whose command of the derogatory epithet suggest his is far from Johnny-cum-lately racism. What Davies

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thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people', Sir William Macpherson, 'Report of *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry*', 24 February, 1999, [www.cre.gov.uk/pdfs/slinqlea.pdf](http://www.cre.gov.uk/pdfs/slinqlea.pdf).

<sup>38</sup> The film was presented on ITV on 23 December, 2001, and in the USA on PBS's Masterpiece Theater, on 28 January, 2002, one week after the docudrama *The Murder of Stephen Lawrence*, was aired on the same channel. David Marriott offers a powerful reading of a much publicised family photograph of Stephen Lawrence, along with a compelling critique of English racism: 'In the press reactions written overwhelmingly by white men, Stephen's murder has become the repository of the fragmentary and desacralised remnants of conscience liberalism; a sphere where supposedly our most basic desires and interdictions lie, a realm in which our quotidian sense of moral decency may appear closed-off from us, but which we must accede to since it is the realm of meaning and value in being English'. See *On Black Men* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 120.

<sup>39</sup> Ben Okri, 'Leaping out of Shakespeare's Terror: Five Meditations on *Othello*', in *A Way of Being Free* (London: Phoenix, 1997), p. 80.

<sup>40</sup> Andrew Davies, *Othello*, production notes on DVD.

achieves that Shakespeare did not is a formal ascription of cause to Iago; no longer a motiveless malignant, now an overlooked, senior establishment figure new-inspired.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, Davies supposes that Othello's blackness is only ancillary to revenge, yet given the steps Jago takes to requite his wrath – making explicit what Shakespeare could only generalise about – the new Commissioner's colour damns him above all. Those feelings Davies refers to extend to the internet,<sup>42</sup> where Jago pronounces to a white supremacist chat room that he has a 'jungle bunny for a boss'. The next we know, a couple of skinheads terrorise the commissioner's new wife during her morning Thames-side constitutional.

So with Ben Jago's opening, omniscient declaration of 'Don't talk to me about race. It was about love, simple as that', we should understand that it was not simple and that we certainly should talk about race. H.R. Coursen agrees, observing that 'we are left to assume that "love" is the lie he is retailing within his world'.<sup>43</sup> But this is an interesting gambit with Shakespearean narrative; and Jago is likely to be believed since he dominates the camera not with Branagh's slyness but with a genuine impulse to succeed, to climb this ladder. Positioning Iago, then, as an (undisclosed) agent of institutional racism, as an active successor to the racialising hierarchies exposed by Macpherson, effectively works to re-institutionalise Shakespeare's racist pre-texts, while giving them political certainty.<sup>44</sup>

As if by default, Jago uses the camera as his *aide de comte*. 'Come on!', he says to us who lag behind him in the corridor, so eager is he to get on with malfeasance, to show us who is in charge here. In short, we/the camera are dogs on his lead, a culmination of our numerous subjections at the hands of Iago and his

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<sup>41</sup> Another narrative diversion from its source, Othello's elevation is unnatural, prompted by *du jour* expediency, and far more likely to cause credible offence to Jago who was, after all, already the number two.

<sup>42</sup> 'with as little web as this will I ensnare...' (2.1.168).

<sup>43</sup> 'The PBS Othello: A Review Essay', in *Shakespeare Bulletin* 20 (2002): 38.

<sup>44</sup> Interestingly, institutional racism has also broached the theatrical arena. Peter Hewitt, the Arts Council's chief executive, had observed that 'the imperative to conquer institutional racism and to embrace and celebrate the diversity of the world's cultures has never been more acute, especially after the events of 2001'. Nicolas Kent, artistic director of the Tricycle Theatre in London adds that 'I think there's a lot of institutional racism in Britain. People basically need to be much more proactive.... It's not racism born out of any knowing prejudice. It's just an underlying lack of energy to come to terms with the new nation in which we are now living.' See Barbara Lewis, 'British Theater Is Institutionally Racist, Report Says', *Reuters*, 18 April, 2003, [http://www.broadwaystars.com/news/2002\\_04\\_14\\_starchive.shtml](http://www.broadwaystars.com/news/2002_04_14_starchive.shtml).

*Doppelgangers*. The effect of this spatially restricted first-person cinematography is totalising, 'transform[ing] the play into a powerful racist spectacle of miscegenation and violence'.<sup>45</sup> Coursen, on the other hand, finds the process ineffective:

The problem with Jago may rest neither with his clearly articulated motive nor with Eccleston's acting but rather with the medium. What can resonate as evil on the stage, when we are inhabiting the same space as Iago, can arrive as mere nastiness within TV's inevitable diminution. Film can be a space for Iago, as Branagh shows, and as Frank Finlay demonstrated opposite the bravura performance that Laurence Olivier imported to film from his Old Vic stage production. Film, we recall, was a powerful medium for Hitler. Could he have become a world-threatening figure via television?<sup>46</sup>

Who could possibly answer 'no'? Yet I am not sure Coursen's comparison with the theatrical is helpful here, for Jago will never exist on a stage whereas Iago straddles both media. It is simply not a fair fight. I would argue that Jago is possessed of as much evil as television will allow, and Eccleston's malleable, Janus-face, repeatedly swamps the screen, leaving no space for opposition, in much the same way that the Metropolitan Police 'whited out' procedure in the days and weeks following Stephen Lawrence's murder.

Otherwise, of course, Jago is raising merry hell. Allen Roderick (Del Snyott) is one of the four policemen involved in the estate beating, although he as a mere by-stander who becomes the prosecution's stool-pigeon. The terrified Roderick goes for a drink with Jago the night before the court hearing; the next we know he is on a mortuary slab, 'alcohol and sleeping pills, the death of a depressed man', Jago informs his boss, as the case against the three racist officers collapses amid dramatic scenes at Crown Court. The Ensign-cum-Deputy Commissioner has also told Michael Cass (Richard Coyle) – a junior officer assigned to protect Desi – that the marriage of Othello and Desi is a sham, 'a show marriage...there's nothing going on; he'd like to, but he can't', so as to prompt Cass into making a pass at her.

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<sup>45</sup> James M. Welsh, Richard Vela, and John C. Tibbets, eds., *Shakespeare into Film*, p. 72. Daniel Rosenthal's review of the adaptation situates this production among other wholesale appropriations of the plays over the last decade. See 'Inspector Moor: Othello as the first black Metropolitan Police chief? If you think ITV has lost the plot, then what about Macbeth as a fight between rival fast-food joints?' See *The Observer*, 25 November, 2001.

<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/screen/story/0,6903,605526,00.html>.

<sup>46</sup> 'The PBS Othello: A Review Essay', p. 39.

In a fine shot from cinematographer Daf Hobson, which mirrors a shot from Welles's adaptation, Othello and Desi (Keeley Hawes) will discuss Cass's suitability to protect her through a diptych mirror, he on the left, she right, each appearing in their own frame, as if looking in opposite directions, suggesting the split to come. Desi gently rebuffs Cass's advance, for their marriage is far from aphysical. Othello and Desi have sex three times within the first thirty minutes, yet without, I must note, being invaded by a lingering voyeuristic gaze.<sup>47</sup>

At dinner with Jago, Lulu (Rachel Stirling) who has become Jago's lover/confidant, and Desi, Othello introduces us to the cracked Fanonian psyche of his past – 'When I was younger, I was ashamed of the part of me that wanted to be white' – to St. Lucia, and to his slave grandparents, which explanations are hardly, writes Coursen, 'the fabulous adventures among alien flora and plumage that Othello describes to the fascinated Venetian Senate'.<sup>48</sup> Yet instead of giving us a set of fantasy signifiers which adduce unknown exotica, as does Othello, Davies provides a concrete, post-Shakespearean tangibility and a direct temporal link from the fledgling suppression of the early-seventeenth century to the 'age of suppression' over the ensuing three-hundred years. This is also why John and Desi's swank pad in Docklands is situated with considerable fidelity to Shakespeare, on the Thames, a direct route to the centre of white, supremacist power once followed by thousands of slave ships.

Cass pitches up at dinner to congratulate Desi, a bad move as Othello is by now convinced (with more than a little help from his friend) that Desi and Cass are having an affair (which Cass, as I have said, would like). Othello's madness is instantiated by a very physical challenging of Cass, together with his attempts, once home, to find any form of evidence, be it from computer records, by sniffing the sheets, or by ripping open draws, desperate for a sign. The 'proof' lies in (or more precisely, on) the oversized handkerchief – a silk dressing-gown – given to Othello by Desi, and transferred to the lab by Jago, who tells Othello that the results are positive, that Cass's semen has been found on the lining. Given the

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<sup>47</sup> The only point at which we are invited to adore Othello is when we follow his morning indoor swim, with the camera slowly closing on his be-trunked body.

<sup>48</sup> 'The PBS Othello: A Review Essay', p. 40.

incontrovertibility of DNA testing, a scientific evidencing of guilt that advances Iago's ensnaring fictions, Othello's oversight in not asking to *see* the proof is as unconvincing as it is unlikely.

Significant to the linguistic vortex that descends upon the Venetian Othello is Othello's appearance on *Question Time* and his inability to respond to a question about whether or not the society he lives in is fundamentally racist. He is silent, depressed, voice-less, absent. The media leaps on this aberrance: 'POLICE CHIEF CRACKS UP ON TV' is the *Evening Standard* headline that proclaims his inherent unsuitability for his new job. Desi's subsequent murder is neither planned nor discussed with Jago. The act of smothering her in her bed is one of spontaneity. On discovery, Jago tells Othello that the lab 'cocked up', that Cass was not part of this pathological equation at all which, when tied in with Othello's refusal to demand the evidence, is a somewhat fanciful resolution to the issue.

Unlike Odin, the Commissioner shoots himself in the head, not the heart (the rational versus the passional?) Uniquely, we are not in any sense party to his suicide, not witnesses at the willed defilement of his black body. Having evicted an enraged Lulu and a delighted Jago from his apartment, Othello is isolated and unseen in death. The camera remains locked on Lulu and Jago, who wait below, dockside. The sound of a single gun-shot rings out, and that is all ye need to know. 'It was a brave experiment', says the PM. The film closes with a sincere, taciturn Jago having his portrait photo taken, cleverly blinded by the flash's white light. Herein lies Davies's jarring response to Iago's eternal silence and torture: promotion. The racist destroyer is called to head the organization that avows to destroy racism and he commences with an act of not-speaking. Jago's silence aligns itself with the creeping insidiousness of racism within corporate mind-sets, with all its potential to live on, beyond sanction, and is a finely finessed close to the film.

With Odin's inability to offer spoken resistance we saw an ill-conceived appropriative response to Othello's suicide. The boy's inability to rise above the white strictures of his sport condemn him, for he is otherwise empty, both rhetorically and morally. There is a sense of complicity in Iago's work. And here is where the Jago-figure returns, manipulating Shakespeare's DNA, tinkering with

evidence, forging results, slam-dunking fidelity to its source. It is with the *Othello* of the early seventeenth century and our obsessive, on-going need to manipulate the question of his identity that I will close.

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A century ago, W.E.B. Du Bois presaged the 'the colour line' to be 'the problem of the 20<sup>th</sup> century'.<sup>49</sup> If I can extrapolate from this in terms of *Othello*'s presentation to filmgoers, these famous words obtain still. Just as the very appearance in the early seventeenth century of (perhaps) Richard Burbage, blacked-up with burnt cork, maybe wearing dark gloves, must have acted as a powerful visual metaphor beyond any language that Shakespeare put to page, so the association of colour, of non-whiteness, with *Othello* on celluloid has continually disturbed critics and critiques.

What we will never know is how the earliest audiences responded to a 'black' Venetian on stage; whether they saw a black man or a white man blacked up in the service of a transgressive performance. Where Sir Dudley Carleton was offended that white courtiers should blacken themselves and display unseemly insincerity in front of foreigners,<sup>50</sup> Michael Bristol sees the theatre-house *Othello* as a 'comedy of abjection' steeped in the custom of charivari. As such, its hero 'would have been seen as comically monstrous', 'a kind of blackface clown...an exotic, monstrous, and funny substitute who transgresses the norms'. While undermining the premise of our tragic reception of *Othello*, Bristol takes a shot at those who would claim *Othello* for their own: 'For Shakespeare and for his audience, the sensibilities of racial difference are for all practical purposes abstract and virtually disembodied, since the mythology of African racial inferiority is not yet a fully implemented

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<sup>49</sup> *The Souls of Black Folks* [1903] (New York: Penguin, 1989), p. 13.

<sup>50</sup> See my critique of *The Masque of Blacknesse* in Chapter II.

social practice';<sup>51</sup> in other words, that Shakespeare did not know black skin well enough either to abuse it or praise it.

What we can know, at this end of time, within the contemporary, Anglo-American purview, suggests that we are shifting away from this confrontation, from placing Shakespeare's Othello on screen, and replacing him with purpose-written, industry-controlled blackness. As a dramatist, Shakespeare perfectly well understood the need to give things a local habitation and a name, just as he himself did with Cinthio's dry tale, whose protagonist was 'a mere stereotype, noteworthy in Venice only for being black, jealous, and vengeful'.<sup>52</sup> Shakespeare was himself a major appropriator, liberty-taker, literary grave-robber; in dramatic terms he was an honest-to-goodness liar; and we in our fumbblings do him proud.<sup>53</sup> There was clearly never any question of hiring a white actor to black up as Odin or as John Othello (it would be hard to see the point of Sax's *Othello* being made at all were it not for the recognition of institutionalised racists). These recent roles were created for black men in our sensitized present; not for white men in our illiberal past.<sup>54</sup>

What we see in the most up-to-date Othellos available are purpose-created black roles, discrete, *sui generis*. They are not up for grabs, these Nothellos. A corollary of our recent refusals to grapple with the presentation of colour (and instead to create new, essential paradigms) is to ask why Othello himself should be black. His creator had no empiric qualifications to facilitate his racial discourse. I cannot really argue that he was any more assured of white quiddity either, given that his knowledge of not-white was limited to his *creative* response to extant, fanciful narratives. And beyond this, I can return to a writer I have relied upon in this thesis who helps me explain my position: 'The poet used this background very

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<sup>51</sup> 'Race and the Comedy of Abjection in Othello', in *Big-time Shakespeare* (London and New York: Routledge), pp. 181-2, 186. See also Robert Hornback, 'Emblems of folly in the first *Othello*: renaissance blackface, moor's coat, and "muckender"', in *Comparative Drama* 35 (2001): 69-100.

<sup>52</sup> Edward Berry, 'Othello's Alienation', in *Studies in English Literature* 30 (1990): 316.

<sup>53</sup> 'Shakespeare may serve as the single most powerful signifier in literary culture, but it is culture that inscribes and reinscribes his name – that *names* and *renames* him'. See Ivo Kamps, 'Alas, poor Shakespeare! I knew him well', in *Shakespeare and Appropriation*, eds. Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 25.

<sup>54</sup> Burt opines that 'precisely because Shakespeare's language is dropped from *O*, Mekhi Phifer will either not be added to the list of black actors from Robeson to Fishburne who have played Othello or have a secondary relation to the Shakespeare play – "Othello" rather than Othello' ('Slammin' Shakespeare In Acc(id)ents Yet Unknown', p. 220n.38).

sensitively, exploiting its potentialities for suggestion, but at the same time moving away from stereotypes, so that in the end Othello emerges, not as another manifestation of a type, but as a distinct individual who typified by his fall not the weakness of Moors, but the weaknesses of human nature'.<sup>55</sup> In other words, Othello was always both black and not-black, another who was not what he was.

As Toni Morrison has observed, 'Whiteness alone is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless'.<sup>56</sup> Why, then, should we settle for centuries-old, monolithic facsimiles of truth? If Othello is truly black – and here it is worth recalling that not once in the play does Othello defend his blackness – created by the white Shakespeare at some essentialising best, why should the black community participate in further forgeries under white direction? Why should the black actor validate the collusion that has taken place?<sup>57</sup> Shelia Rose Bland, a black theatre director, asserts that she would play Othello as an all-white, all-male 'minstrel show' so as to 'amplify the racist nature of the play', which, in turn, would 'alienate and cause discomfort to the audience'. Bland is one who sees the character as invalidated by both the teatro-historic circumstances of his creation and the ineffaceable, parodic nature of numerous interpretations; yet Othello retains the

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<sup>55</sup> Eldred Jones, *Othello's Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama*, p. 87.

<sup>56</sup> *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1993), p. 59.

<sup>57</sup> The St. Kittsean novelist Caryl Phillips has, in *The Nature of Blood* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997) created a narrative for Othello in 1480. The Moor's role is analogous to three other, interwoven diasporic tales of the persecution of Jews, including the Holocaust circa 1942, and the creation of Israel in 1946. Through a stilted narrative, Phillips bestows Fanonian insecurity on his African general:

Some among these people, both high and low, were teaching me to think of myself as a man less worthy than the person I knew myself to be. My own people, although degraded and without the sophistication and manners of these Venetians, at least regarded me with respect and dignity, and among them I had many friends, and some few enemies, all of whom were easily identifiable. Among the Venetians, all was confusion as I attempted to distinguish those who beheld my person with scorn and contempt, from those who simply looked upon me with the curiosity that one would associate with a child. (pp. 118-9)

Unfortunately, and without reason, Phillips truncates his Shakespearean narrative, concluding with Othello and Desdemona freshly installed at Cyprus. Out go Iago, jealousy, revenge, murder and suicide. J.M. Coetzee expresses similar frustration at the work, which he calls "Othello minor rather than Othello major". See 'Caryl Phillips', in *Stranger Shores: Essays 1986-1999* (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 197. The opportunity for a black writer to engage with the fullness of a dynamic, black mind as it toils under intense duress is wasted and the work, although historically engaging, ignores the targets set by Shakespeare and reduces the Moor to a successful and integrated African which, in terms of the struggle his counterpart faced, is a pale reflection of Otherness observed.

power to fool, 'because black actors are real people, with real human feeling, they have been striving for centuries to humanize Othello, a character who perhaps was never meant to be more than a caricature'.<sup>58</sup>

Ben Okri reminds us of the *lack* of potency of Shakespeare's black creation: 'In three centuries of Othello committing murder and suicide on the stage no significant change in attitude towards black people has occurred'.<sup>59</sup> As long as we continue to misunderstand the black presence, we will we misalign representational priorities. Would Othello be black if played, directed, distributed by black? No. He will never enjoy black ownership; textually he is essential, immutable, arising both linguistically and imaginatively from within the white, western, humanities-driven discourse. Othello is a site of contestation, one which we are fortunate to have. Without this dialectic, there would be no debate, we would be deprived of a sounding-board for racial sentiment and awareness. I am glad he disturbs us in this way. We need it. In another essay, Okri again helps me to observe my point:

Certainty has always been the enemy of art and creativity; more than that it has been the enemy of humanity... In the name of certainties, nations and individuals had come to regard themselves as gods. This certainty, whether its name be religion, imperialism, ideology, class, caste, race, or sex, has been the great undoing of our measureless heritage, and has narrowed the vastness of human possibility and marvelous variety.<sup>60</sup>

Given the historic lack of certainty surrounding Othello's colour, and the absolute certainty of creating ambiguity whenever he is represented (both of which I hope to have brought out here), I wonder whether it might be time to reassert that theatre and film are unique agencies of transformation and transcendence, that a suspension of disbelief is still possible in our cosseted days, and to hand Othello back to actors of all colours? The excitable reviews that Adrian Lester currently commands as one of the patriarchy's proudest symbols of British-ness ridicule any who would argue that Henry V must be a white man.<sup>61</sup> I need hardly say that Lester

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<sup>58</sup> 'How I would Direct "Othello"', in *Othello: New Essays by Black Writers*, ed. Mythili Kaul (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1997), p. 31.

<sup>59</sup> 'Leaping out of Shakespeare's Terror: Five Meditations on *Othello*', p. 79.

<sup>60</sup> 'The Joys of Storytelling I', in *A Way of Being Free* (London: Phoenix, 1997), p. 30.

<sup>61</sup> At The National Theatre, London.

takes a white role by a white dramatist with a circumscribed cultural understanding, and performs it as a black man to considerable acclaim.

An excellent example of the obverse, of a white director's progressive, emancipative use of Othello's skin colour came with Jude Kelly's recent 'photo negative' production in Washington, D.C.<sup>62</sup> Patrick Stewart, the whiter for his blank pate, took a black role crafted by our empirically unworldly dramatist, and performed it as a white man. The English actor went boldly where few men had gone before, using his white skin as the signifier of Otherness when otherwise surrounded by black Venetians played by black Americans,<sup>63</sup> and commenting in the process that 'to replace the black outsider with a white man in a black society, will, I hope, encourage a much broader view of the fundamentals of racism, and perhaps even question those triggers – you know, color of skin, physiognomy, language, culture – that can produce instant feelings of fear, suspicion and so forth'.<sup>64</sup>

The play's director, Jude Kelly, noted that 'When an all white or mostly white audience watches a black Othello, the reaction can be liberal but patronizing. This production is a deliberate attempt to reverse that situation, to make white audiences experience some of the feelings of isolation and discomfort that black people experience all of the time in their lives'.<sup>65</sup> The jarring dislocations within Kelly's

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<sup>62</sup> The play ran at the Shakespeare Theatre from 11 November, 1997 to 4 January, 1998. The capital was a distinct choice of locale for the production: 60% of its inhabitants are of African American descent.

<sup>63</sup> The only exceptions to this wholesale reversal were Bianca and Brabantio's house servants

<sup>64</sup> From Ray Greene, 'Patrick Stewart: The Veteran Shakespearean Actor Brings a "New Kind of Othello" to The Shakespeare Theatre', <http://www.shakespearetheatre.org/pastprod/othstewart.html>. Although the play was received ecstatically by reviewers, and had a sell-out run, not all commentators seemed to suspend their disbelief. 'For a white audience to see a white actor and character scorned in vicious racist terms could have been a scathing theater experience, but the whole issue just seems confused. What is the audience supposed to think when Stewart, an actor whose mouth is like a slit in his face, is derided with the remark "thick lips"? Or when, pale pate gleaming, he announces in the plummiest of English accents, "Haply, for I am black . . ."? Or when a black actor castigates Othello for his dark-skinned ugliness? If the purpose was to show how foolish and empty racial derogations are, how they're just words, the device misfires. Racial derogations end up seeming meaningless, even harmless – surely not what Kelly intended'. See Lloyd Rose, 'Othello: Twist on Timeless Tragedy', in *The Washington Post*, 18 November, 1997: C01.

<sup>65</sup> In an interview with *The Guardian* theatre critic, Lyn Gardner, at <http://www.shakespearetheatre.org/pastprod/othjkelly1.html>.

image/text binarisms edified Robert L. King, who found considerable depth in the director's disruptive agenda:

Stewart's whiteness has become a fact of performance, easy to overlook. So when he says to us in soliloquy, 'Haply for I am black,' we are reminded of a dramatic truth which our senses tell us is false: 'I am black' is wrong because the speaker is obviously white; but white is wrong because Othello is black. This disruptive moment, like others in the production, brings color to the forefront of our attention and makes us think about its dramatic and social weight.<sup>66</sup>

The critic concluded that colour 'is one of several misleading appearances; in Shakespeare, as in the Kelly/Stewart Othello, it is finally irrelevant to what really makes us humane'.<sup>67</sup> Clearly, a white Othello did not designify the colour divide. Kelly took Othello to the very centre of American politics, both geographically and ideologically; she ran the gauntlet of incandescence in an act of blatant provocation; and she won. It is a matter of courage, that is all. We whites learn about black and white in the process, extrapolating from a static text the most powerful, polemical imagery in the political spectrum, and broadcasting it, successfully or, of course, otherwise. The frustrated bell hooks despairs of white supremacist control over mainstream narrative and image, in that

the ways in which white people are policed by other white people in the arena of cinematic cultural production receives little attention. This allows for the fiction to endure that there is more artistic freedom to create progressive representations of race than there actually is. And here, it is a matter of depicting not only black characters in a progressive manner but also white characters and everyone else.<sup>68</sup>

Though her frame be cinematic, it seems as if in Stewart's white Moor she may have found the answer to her concerns.

On the point of depiction, I would also like to make clear that I do not write in support of a blackface Moor, quite simply because I, like Michael Bristol, do not believe Othello was created as a means of demeaning black skin and black culture. I seek non-traditional casting and non-traditional means of Othering Othello. If

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<sup>66</sup> Robert L. King, 'The seeing place', in *The North American Review*, 283.5 (1998): 37.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*:36.

<sup>68</sup> 'artistic integrity', in *reel to real: race, sex, and class at the movies*, p. 74.

Shakespeare had a target, it was the display of human emotion when pushed up to and beyond the bounds of the acceptable, the containable.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, a recent Spike Lee movie tells us that when the stereotype is so entrenched, so oppressive, and so misleading in itself, it is only reinforced through the parodic.

In *Bamboozled*,<sup>70</sup> the black director assails (and suffers from) the danger of regenerating this long-abandoned signifier/stereotype of blackface entertainment. Searching for an idea that will rescue a flagging career, Damon Wayans' black TV executive decides to create a product so offensive to mainstream audiences that he will be fired, whereupon he will garner generous emoluments. Cue 'Mantan – The New Millennium Minstrel Show', in which Mantan and his side kick, Sleep'N Eat, sing, joke, and tap-dance their way across a water-melon patch on a slave plantation. Both are black, both are blacked up with burnt cork, and both paint onto themselves huge, garish red lips. Every black myth from slave history appears on TV: Mammies, Uncles Rastus, Picaninnies. Unfortunately, the show is an instant hit, audiences black and white pour in to the recordings, donning black masks and white gloves, and joining in the celebration of black folks' vaunted laziness, idiocy and musicality. Ultimately, Mantan is kidnapped by a radical black nationalist rap collective (who nonetheless auditioned for the show and failed) who execute him via a live web broadcast for being an Uncle Tom.

Lee's film attempts to satirise the American media's obsession with and (mis)use of images of black people. Into his pot, Lee pours subtle racial blends: for example, Wayans' character, Pierre Delacroix, is an ideologically 'whitened' black man with a ludicrously *effete* Eurotrash accent, supported in his subversive venture by his white boss, an aptly named 'Dunwitty', who claims to be more black than his subordinate, due to 'a black wife and two biracial kids'. Drunk with success, Delacroix surrounds himself with ghastly 'gollywog' paraphernalia. He too will die (this is Spike Lee after all). Roger Ebert concluded that the film fails due to the exposure of its stereotype: 'Blackface is so blatant, so wounding, so highly charged, that it obscures any point being made by the person wearing it. The makeup is the

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<sup>69</sup> Michael Neill broadly covers this issue in "“Mulattos,” “Blacks,” and “Indian Moors”: “Othello” and early modern constructions of human difference', in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 49 (1998): 361-74.

<sup>70</sup> A Forty Acres and a Mule Filmworks Production, 2000.

message'.<sup>71</sup> In other words, to Ebert, the film fails because of itself. Blackface will ever be a signifier loaded with centuries of white, racial totalitarianism.

While sending up the power of the stereotype, Lee can do nothing to dispel it; he speaks to bell hooks' concerns that 'our cultural failure to understand that merely putting black characters in a film does not assure that the work acts, whether covertly or overtly, to undermine racism. Those black characters can be constructed cinematically so that they become mouthpieces for racist assumptions and beliefs'.<sup>72</sup> Blackface is indeed reprehensible, but no amount of garish, satirizing imagery will bury it. But here hooks speaks for the efforts of Oliver Parker, Tim Blake Nelson and even Trevor Nunn, each of whom in his casting attempted to assert a skin-based fidelity to Shakespeare.

I am fully aware that this closing argument fuels debate; that is my intention. By being certain, we lose; our imaginative capability is straitened, restricted. There is no black without white, no white without black. To argue that Shakespeare created an inviolable, essential black presence is to demean his creative capability, is to deny the fertility of scholarship, and is to assert that racism works and will not go away, that an answer has been found and that the debate can be put to sleep.<sup>73</sup> It is demeaning to the black caucus to argue that *Othello* is essential, whether Negro, Coloured, Afro-American, Afro-Caribbean, black, brown, tawny. This simply does not tie in with what we know he knew: 'Given the lack of information available to Elizabethans on African cultures, even in *Leo Africanus*, Shakespeare might have had *Othello*'s rootlessness virtually forced upon him; representing a homeless wanderer perhaps offered him a way of dramatizing alienation without the necessity of creating a credible cultural background'.<sup>74</sup>

As far back as 1922, critics were asserting the flawed generics of *Leo Africanus*'s reportage and, in turn, the creation by Shakespeare of a synthetic,

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<sup>71</sup> 'Bamboozled', in *Chicago Sun Times*, 6 October, 2000,

[http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert\\_reviews/2000/10/100601.html](http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/2000/10/100601.html).

<sup>72</sup> 'artistic integrity', in *reel to real: race, sex, and class at the movies*, p. 74.

<sup>73</sup> The RSC's Hugh Quarshie agrees, asserting that racially speaking, *Othello* works only to reinforce negative stereotypes. See 'Hesitations on *Othello*', in *International Shakespeare Association Occasional Papers* 7 (1999).

<sup>74</sup> Edward Berry, 'Othello's Alienation', in *Studies in English Literature* 30 (1990): 323.

compendium African.<sup>75</sup> Critics such as Edward Berry submit that Shakespeare's aggrandizement of Cinthio's tale produces anything but an observable *individual*: 'Othello's blackness is not only a mark of his physical alienation but a symbol, to which every character in the play, himself included, must respond'.<sup>76</sup> In support of Shakespeare, however, the same critic argues that 'such thinking [on Shakespeare's part] frees one to imagine authentic cultural difference'.<sup>77</sup> That search for such authentic cultural difference is what gave rise to my work here.

It is apparent that the casting of a genuine black Othello is no less fraught with an anxiety of influence than is the blacking up of a white actor. Had we had no white Othellos, how could we debate the rightful places of blackness and whiteness within all-consuming ideologies? This thesis would not have been possible but for the existence of white-cum-black Othellos and certainly, in the case of Orson Welles, we would have lost powerful insight into the Shakespearean creation. Speaking of our continued misperception of Shakespeare's creation, Ben Okri restores the historical imperative onto the Moor: 'It is the accepted thing to comment upon Othello's jealousy, but few critics seem to realize that his colour, his otherness, must imply a specific history in white society. It seems that into the vessel of Othello's skin, Shakespeare poured whiteness. It is possible that Othello actually is a blackened white man'.<sup>78</sup> I cannot be sure of any ironic intent here, but I doubt Okri would overlook the total accuracy of his last sentence, for that is exactly why Othello, circa 1602, was created.

To this day, now on celluloid, the Moor remains exclusively part of the white, capitalistic purview in that he is coached, dressed and positioned by white directors under the gaze of white cameramen at the behest of the industry's meltdown millionaires. He is in every sense a blackened white man, now darkened again and again through Western eyes, for all his transgressive capabilities. Of his 'appearances' on film, critics (including this one) have lined up to praise and

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<sup>75</sup> See Lois Whitney, 'Did Shakespeare Know "Leo Africanus?"', in *PMLA* 37 (1922): 470-83. 'The evidence [from Africanus] would seem to point to the conclusion that Shakespeare was describing neither a Moor nor a Negro in our modern conception of the term but a confusion of two types' (477).

<sup>76</sup> 'Othello's Alienation', in *Studies in English Literature* 30 (1990): 319.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*: 317.

<sup>78</sup> Ben Okri, 'Leaping out of Shakespeare's Terror: Five Meditations on *Othello*', p. 78.

excoriate him in roughly equal measure. But whether it be for ingenuity and innovation or for creative insouciance and representational travesty, the crucial point here is that this blackened white man was, is, and will most likely continue to be, the slave of the white man too, and racially invalid for this and this alone. To project Du Bois into the twenty-first century, therefore, I would propose that for the future of *Othello* on screen, the problem will remain the colour line; the debate, though, will focus upon where, and how, to draw it on the Moor.

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