

Anna Kowalcze-Pawlik*

The Moor's Political Colour: Race and *Othello* in Poland

Abstract: This paper provides a brief outline of the reception history of *Othello* in Poland, focusing on the way the character of the Moor of Venice is constructed on the page, in the first-published nineteenth-century translation by Józef Paszkowski, and on the stage, in two twentieth-century theatrical adaptations that provide contrasting images of Othello: 1981/1984 televised *Othello*, dir. Andrzej Chrzanowski and the 2011 production of *African Tales Based on Shakespeare*, in which Othello's part is played by Adam Ferency (dir. Krzysztof Warlikowski). The paper details the political and social contexts of each of these stage adaptations, as both of them employ brownface and blackface to visualise Othello's "political colour." The function of blackface and brownface is radically different in these two productions: in the 1981/1984 *Othello* brownface works to underline Othello's overall sense of alienation, while strengthening the existing stereotypes surrounding black as a skin colour, while the 2011 staging makes the use of blackface as an artificial trick of the actor's trade, potentially unmasking the constructedness of racial prejudices, while confronting the audience with their own pernicious racial stereotypes.

Keywords: *Othello* in Poland; blackface in theatre; brownface in theatre; race in translation.

"Affer" Tales: *Othello* in Poland

Othello is a play, whose staging history in Poland is not particularly rich, with around 40 premieres listed since the beginning of the 20th century on www.encykopediateatru.pl, the Polish theatrical database focusing on the history of professional theatrical troupes. The play entered the landscape of the Polish Shakespeare history first through theatrical performance and only then in translation (Cetera-Włodarczyk, Kosim 118). Owing to numerous theatrical stagings based on the texts sourced from Schiller and Ducis, *Othello* was a play already known to theatre-goers when the first unpublished Polish translation was produced by Ignacy Hołowiński in 1834 (Cetera 20-22), and when the first

* University of Lodz, Poland.

complete Polish translation by Józef Paszkowski came out in 1859,¹ only to be followed by another endeavour by Szczesny Kluczycki in 1880 (Warsaw) and 1889 (Lviv).²

The question of Othello's ethnic origin comes to the fore already in the discussion on the margins of the unpublished manuscript of the Ignacy Hołowiński 1834 translation. The marginalia containing the reviewer's remarks include the following commentary on the Polish title of the play, *Otello albo Murzyn z Wenecji* [Othello, or the Venetian Negro]: "Venetian Negro makes one think of the Venetian Devil, enslaved. I would call him Moor, the Venetian General."³ This off-hand marginal remark attests to the strength of the stereotyped negative representation of Africans in the Polish culture, long mediated through the Bible, medieval hagiographic accounts and readings in ancient history.⁴ The image of the "black-faced devil" was gradually accompanied by another, equally strong negative representation, perpetuated by early modern travelogues detailing fantastic encounters with bestial, cruel and—necessarily—cannibal tribes as well as generic portrayals of "lazy Affers"; these would regularly point to the Biblical story of Noe's son, Cham, as their literary forefather, thus justifying the modern conglomerate of essentialising racist preconceptions and ethnic metaphors (Tazbir 89-110).⁵ The growing fascination with the exotic and the encounters with black pages and servants on the voyages of Polish nobles throughout Europe resulted not only in transplanting the pan-European *moro* heads fashion onto the Polish soil,⁶ but also in the use of

¹ The first partial translation was published by Leon Ulrich in 1840-1842. (Cetera-Włodarczyk, Kosim).

² The list includes: William Shakespeare, *Otello albo Murzyn z Wenecyi* Shakespeara, trans. Ignacy Hołowiński, BJ Mns. 4211. William Shakespeare, *Otello*, trans. Józef Paszkowski in: Henryk Biegeleisen (ed.), *Dziela Williama Szekspira*, T. 1, *Tragedye*, Księgarnia Polska, Lwów 1895, p. 230-346. William Shakespeare, *Otello*, trans. Józef Paszkowski, in: William Shakespeare, *Dziela dramatyczne w dwunastu tomach, życiorys Shakespeare'a i przedm. do poszczególnych utworów*, ed. Roman Dyboski, T. 10, Gebethner i Wolff, Warszawa 1912. William Shakespeare, *Otello. Tragedya w 5 aktach*, trans. Szczesny Kluczycki, Wydawnictwo Dziel Tanich A. Wiślickiego, Warszawa 1880; William Shakespeare, *Otello. Tragedja w 5 aktach Szekspira*, trans. Szczesny Kluczycki, Księgarnia Polska, Lwów 1889. More on these translations, see Cetera-Włodarczyk and Kosim.

³ „Murzyn wenecki przypomina poniewolenie Djabła Weneckiego. Jabym go nazwał prędzej Maur, wódz wenecki” qtd. in Cetera-Włodarczyk, Kosim 2019. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations mine.

⁴ Admittedly, some of the hagiographic accounts perpetuated in Poland from the medieval times presented black saints in a decidedly positive light; St Maurice is one of the more popular saints.

⁵ For "ethnic metaphors" in Polish contemporary discourse, see Zarzycka.

⁶ Cf. Dolczewski.

blackface in theatre, during diverse ceremonies, at costume balls, even as first people of colour found their way to Poland through slavery, gift exchange and warfare with the Ottoman Empire (Tazbir 89).⁷ Ignacy Hołowiński's translation conforms to strong social expectations of the time and place, playing down the erotic language and imagery present in *Othello*, while tapping into the hierarchising discourse of racial difference.

Translating Race: Józef Paszkowski's 1859 *Otello*

The first officially published translation by Józef Paszkowski also does away with much of the vulgarity and eroticism present in the original, while establishing a firm racialised frame of reference for Othello's origin. Paszkowski's text, used already in 1869 in the Polish premiere of the play in Krakow, became one of the most popular versions of the play both in print and for the stage well until the 1970s. As this was the translation, whose influence has turned out to be decisive for the reception of *Othello* for over a hundred years, it is worth investigating how it tackles the question of race and in what way it constructs Othello's alterity, especially as far as the references to his ethnicity are concerned. Unlike the US or the British Empire at the time, the multi-ethnic nineteenth-century society inhabiting what used to be the Polish territories, shared an experience of alterity that was based predominantly on such markers of group identity as religion, nationality and language, which were then translated into the sources of racial difference (Kujawińska Courtney, "Othello in Poland" 343-345). The colonial context and discourse was introduced into Polish mainly owing to such published sources as Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz's journal description of his American travels and an empathetic narrative of slavery,⁸ such sentimentalising bestsellers as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, translated into Polish already in 1853, and in ethnographic studies detailing the lives of "savages"; all these had a major impact on the way people of colour were thought of, possibly preparing the ground for the way Ira Aldridge was first apprehended during his tournees, especially when seen in the

⁷ Robert Hornback points to the significance of trans-Atlantic slave trade for the use of blackface: [...] blackface became a sign of one marked as both transgressor and [...] as a scapegoat, whipping boy, an *insipiens*, a fool—and also a slave. Here again the license authorized by blackface, which modern scholars have occasionally invoked as liberating, was symbolically and stereotypically limiting (70).

⁸ Niemcewicz J.U., *Pamiętniki Juliana Ursyna Niemcewicza, 1804–1807. Dziennik drugiej podróży do Ameryki*, Lwów 1873.

role of Othello.⁹ This lack of immediate context and the gradual emergence of institutional racism had some bearing also on Paszkowski's text.

Where Othello is described as "Othello, the Moor [a general in service of Venice]", in Paszkowski's rendering he becomes a more generalised: "Otello, wódz: murzyn" ["Othello, general: negro"¹⁰], with the word *murzyn* rendered in lowercase instead of capitalisation, which is used, however sparingly, also in the main text. Paszkowski seems to underline here the paradox apparently inherent in the coupling of the two nouns, adding a comment in 1.3.65:

The Venetian Commonwealth used to, because of political reasons, allot the leadership of its armies to foreigners, and not the native inhabitants [of Venice] who could use that power to implement plans contrary to the country's liberties. (1859 89)

The Polish etymology of the word *Murzyn* is rather blurry and that the lack of capitalisation does not necessarily involve disrespect, as it might have been treated both ethnonymically, and descriptively (Łazinski). The term *Murzyn* is defined together with its diminutive form, *Murzynek*, in the 1807-1812 *Dictionary of the Polish Language* by Samuel Bogusław Linde as an ethnonym "commonly" used to denote the black inhabitants of Nigeria, Abyssinia. In a move characteristic for essentialist discourse, always on the lookout to establish a link between emotive scripts for humanity and Western logocentrism, the quality distinctive for that group is anger, while the quotes accompanying the definition connect the etymology with the impossibility of washing the black off: its cognate is the verb *murzyć*, i.e. "to stain", or "to darken" (Linde 164-165). This same dictionary does not mention at all the two other pejorative terms denoting blackness in Polish, *Negr* or *czarnuch*, which could be translated as "Negro" and "Nigger" respectively. Their occurrence in Polish is rather late: *Negr* is noted in the 1850s and *czarnuch* in 1900. This allows for a conjecture that in the absence of other more pejorative vocabulary, the residual meaning of the term *murzyn* would be brought to the fore in the translation, and serve as a context-dependent lexeme.

When speaking to Roderigo in Act I Jago ironically discusses "his moorship" (1.1.32); in Paszkowski's version it becomes *jego murzyńskiej mości*,

⁹ Krystyna Kujawińska Courtney discusses the significance of the 19th-century scientific discourse essentialising racial difference and leading to a conflation of the role and the actor as "a natural African" (*Kurier Lubelski* newspaper, qtd. in Kujawinska Courtney "Ira Aldridge" 112).

¹⁰ I consistently translate the term *murzyn* as *Negro*, because the constellation of idioms, proverbs and texts in which it figures nowadays, fashion it into an offensive word; its abusive potential is fully explored nowadays by the rightist discourse and hate speech in schools, streets and the media in Poland.

["his Negro highness"]; when Iago speaks of his love for "the Moor" (1.1.38), in Polish it is rendered as *Tego Murzyna* (1.1.51) ["that Negro"], with the pronoun "that" adding to the contemptuous, distancing overtone of the passage. This is indicative of the strategy used throughout Paszkowski's version, where the original allusions to Othello's skin colour are rendered throughout the text with the use of the word *murzyn/Murzyn*, whereas other, later translators may choose the functional equivalents of "black" or "tawny"; they may also vary the descriptions; postpone the recognition of Othello's racial identity until later in the play, or, possibly in the service of the euphemism treadmill or for the sake of nobilitating orientalised, replace the term with the word *Maur*, i.e. "Moor/Arab".¹¹ In the absence of more derogatory terminology, the word *murzyn* seems to serve as both a point of offence as well as a regular ethnonym in Paszkowski's translation.

The irony and distancing signalled through syntax rather than the lexis are meant to build a contemptuous image of Othello in other characters' descriptions, and are further strengthened by other translation choices that pertain to Othello. In the exchange with Brabantio, "an old black ram/ [that] Is tupping your white ewe! (1.1.88-87) becomes „czarny baran tryksa/ Białą owieczkę waszą” [the black ram is tupping your *little* white ewe”] (1.1.112-113); the age difference becomes expressed solely through the lexical choice of the words used to speak of the animals involved in the act, as the diminutive *owieczka* stands in radical contrast with *baran*; but Othello is also further offended, as the Polish word *baran* can be used as a pejorative term denoting a "fool." "The thicklips" (1.1.65) of Othello transport him even further into the animal lore in the translation, as in Paszkowski he becomes a *grubodziób* (1.1.85) lit. "fat beak", which Lidia Mielczarek interprets as a further move down the hierarchical kingdom of nature, with the beak interpreted more like a mug (100). *Grubodziób*, however, is also a Polish name for *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*, a hawfinch, or a European grosbeak, described by Linnaeus already in 1758. It is a bird mentioned in Linde's *Dictionary* (784); the plausible reason for an avian metaphor here is rooted in the fact that the species was not always endemic to Poland. In the nineteenth century *grubodziób* was considered pest destroying cherry crops; its physical characteristics, i.e. its massive bill and large size, make it clearly distinguishable from the house sparrow, the most domestic of Polish birds with whom it mingles and against whom it fights. This set of attributes renders the bird an interesting context-dependent source domain for a surprisingly subtle metaphor underlining Othello's alterity.

¹¹ Interestingly, almost contemporaneous translation by Leon Ulrich uses the word *Maur* in the "Introduction," while *Murzyn* (consistently capitalised) is used in the translation; in the introduction it is stated verbatim that Othello had to be a Moor, not a *black* character, like Aaron, because Negroes are savages, while Moors are paragons of virtue [sic(k)].

Even though Paszkowski's text has been gradually replaced in theatre with other more stage-friendly translations, it still exerts a substantial influence over the Polish language and turns out to be still relevant for the academic and public discourse on racism inherent in the word *murzyn*. In his article on the Polish concept of race and the history of the term *murzyn* Marek Łaziński, an eminent Polish linguist, addresses the question heads-on, and starts his discussion on the etymology and history of *murzyn* with the telling subtitle "From Negro [*Murzyn*] to Moor [*Maur*]: *Othello*," arguing:

English *Moor*, German *Mohr* and Polish *Murzyn* did not have unequivocally negative connotations in the pre-colonial era. A Moor was always somebody alien to a European, but not always a slave; he was often perceived, however, as a respect-worthy opponent in fight or as a captive. Such associations are brought about by *Othello*, an officer in Venice's service. (47-56)

In the article Paszkowski's translation is used as a reference text seemingly offering the non-racist context for the use of the Polish race-related terminology. Even though it is hard to disparage the linguistic line of reasoning concerning the Latin etymology and the historical usage of the term, the use of the *argumentum ad Shakespeaream* lends itself to critique, as in his discussion Łaziński does not address either Paszkowski's translation's concrete socio-historical background, from which other lexemes indicative of race were absent; nor gives thought to a thorough analysis of the speech acts and the performance scripts surrounding the use of lexemes pertaining to *Othello*'s ethnic origin either in the original or in the translation.

Masquerading Otherness: Daniel Olbrychski's Brownface

Almost at the same time when racial stereotyping was ridiculed in Peter Zadek's 1976 Hamburg production of *Othello* (Kolin 36), the Polish television theatre was about to screen a filmed performance of *Othello* directed by Andrzej Chrzanowski, which was the third Shakespeare in the history of the Polish Televised Theatre, and its second *Othello*.¹² This particular performance merits

¹² The first one was *Macbeth*, dir. A. Wajda, 1969, teleplay. where Daniel Olbrychski was cast as Banquo. 1964 *Othello*, dir. Jan Maciejowski, trans. Krystyna Berwińska, teleplay, also portrayed *Othello* as a Moor, "Othello by A. Kopiczyński was very young, nimble, agile [...] This take on the role renders Desdemona's love for the handsome Moor more believable; we didn't doubt it that she was not only drawn to him because of his fame, but also owing to his physical appeal." A.O. "Otello" *Radio i Telewizja* no 34, 20 sierpnia 1967, *Othello* [*Otello*]. Dir. Andrzej Chrzanowski. Perf. Daniel Olbrychski, Piotr Fronczewski, Joanna Pacuła. TVP, 1981. teleplay.

special attention, as after its initial ban in 1981 it was replayed on a number of occasions; and when 100 out of the over 3000 teleplays were put together into a DVD "Golden" collection, Chrzanowski's *Othello* became one of the very few Shakespeare plays in the mix.

Chrzanowski's adaptation used a new, especially commissioned translation of the play by Jerzy S. Sito, and the cast was the *crème de la crème* of Polish theatrical and TV actors. In this production the scenes in which Othello is defined racially, are played down; racial slurring is omitted by replacing Paszkowski's word of choice, *murzyn*, with the more Arabic term *Maur*, "Moor", and Daniel Olbrychski in the lead role is given a rather light shade of makeup. Although the brownface looks very artificial, even more so for the lack of eye- and lip-makeup, it seemed to follow the exoticising success of Olbrychski's tour-de-force 1968 and 1969 performances in the role of the fictitious son of the Tatar leader Mirza Tughai Bey, in the film adaptations of Henryk Sienkiewicz's nineteenth-century bestselling novels.¹³

The beginning of the staging brings to the fore the centrality of the conflict between Othello (Daniel Olbrychski) and Iago (Piotr Fronczewski) who stand side-by-side already in the opening credits. The first scene consists of the exchange between Roderigo and Brabantio; the distraught father, however, mentions Othello only once as *Maur*, "the Moor"; when they leave, the camera rolls to a dark corner to reveal the overhearing Iago who then speaks to Othello of the scheming Roderigo and consistently masks as the loyal servant and confidant, also to the unsuspecting audience. The third scene jumps then to the discussion of the political context and the Cyprus conflict. When Brabantio exclaims to Othello "tyś ją zacczarował, ty, rodem z piekła" ["you have bewitched her, you, hell-born"], his outburst is mitigated both by Othello's calm demeanor and his quiet remark on his own political station and the social leverage he has against the Venetian aristocrat. When the scene moves again, it is to the Doge's palace and to the further strategizing of the Cyprus conflict. Even in the "evidence" scene, where Othello is seemingly distraught, Olbrychski retains composure and quietly threatens Iago, then rages on, displaying well-controlled anger of a stoic soldier [sic], while Iago remains matter-of-fact, defiant and ice-cold—a professional hitman. All in all, Olbrychski, already known as Hanuszkiewicz's Hamlet and Zanussi's Banquo, brings a larger-than-life quality to his character, but the universalising and politicising overtone of the performance annihilates both the racial and the domestic overtones of the play; what is underlined instead is the political cat-and-mouse between Othello and Iago.

¹³ Set in the orientalist setting of the early modern Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, in these adaptations the young Tughai Bey is also portrayed in brownface.

Andrzej Żurowski writes in his *Myślenie Szekspirem* [*Thinking Shakespeare*] that after the 1956 the landscape of Shakespeare drama in Poland, hitherto filled only by relatively “safe” comedies, was broadened to include the plays “concerning the issues of History and Power,” with *Othello* included among them as one of the more surprising choices (76). The “domestic” tragedy was staged at the time at least once more as a political drama: the already mentioned 1969 Sttetin televised production by Maciejewski also displayed the Moor trapped in the prison of his own passion, but always ready to put up a political fight: “Thus executed, Maciejewski’s Othello got rid of the racial conflict and perverse eroticism” (Żurowski 132). If his exoticized ethnicity does not become annulled, then it is bracketed; what emerges instead is his political colour. Othello becomes “one of us” through the subjection to the mechanisms of constant surveillance, control and manipulation deployed by Iago. The source of the tragedy is not Othello’s social standing, but his political situation as a subject under surveillance: it is his inability to distinguish spies in his immediate circle and his lack of understanding for doublespeak that become the reasons for his downfall. In the context of Othello’s clash with the totalitarian system orchestrating his demise Desdemona’s death feels almost like collateral damage. Othello’s alterity becomes then somewhat of a masquerade, using and abusing brownface as a political pretext. Jacek Fabiszak underlines that political undertone of the performance which, once produced and ready to air in 1981, was indeed banned by the censors until 1984.¹⁴ It was that uncomfortable, political side of the production which censorship aimed to silence:

The presentation of the character of Iago by Piotr Fronczewski, I would argue, resembled the conduct of the communist political police officers and provocateurs, who not only desired to destroy and defile that which is pure and innocent, but also enjoyed the scheming. Iago was always there in the background, watching and silently conspiring, yet overtly arousing trust and confidence. With Fronczewski’s sober apparel, his plain looks and his “economic” acting, the play could easily have been read as a comment on the work of the secret police, their methods and influence on even the most noble and pure-hearted people. (Fabiszak 64)

¹⁴ Fabiszak notes: “The stress on the political import [of televisual Shakespeare] results from the fact that so far hardly any critical attention has been paid to Shakespeare productions aired on Polish television under the communist regime in terms of their commentary on the contemporaneous politics; a commentary, which out of necessity had to be subtle and implied rather than spelled out, not only because of official state censorship, but also because of the fact that television was under strict control by the state, even more than other media” (59-65).

Communist Poland was a country with a no clear-cut postcolonial past, as it is understood in the mainstream postcolonial studies; its colonial heritage was troubled, but located in regions less obvious than in the West. This, however, does not mean that Chrzanowski's performance in particular and the reception of *Othello* in general successfully steered clear of the issues of race and racism. Daniel Olbrychski himself writes in hindsight that originally he was to be cast as Iago and recalls anecdotally in his memoir a discussion with his friend, Francois Huster, where they both agreed that Othello was not "playable":

It is a Negro [*murzyn*] through and through. Lawrence Oliver showed us how to play a Negro [*murzyn*], but he wasn't one even for a split second. Is it really that interesting to judge how a great actor *imitates* a Negro [*murzyn*]? [...] Over vodka we deliberated with Piotr Fronczewski and finally decided that a Negro, and a bald one for that matter, seemed like a little too much, so we switched roles. I had some 'Persian lamb' done all over my head (oh, the things I heard from the ladies at the hairdresser's!) (98)

The light tone adapted in this passage and its anecdotal feel do not hide that fact that the decision to cast Olbrychski and not Fronczewski as Othello seems from today's perspective to have a generalized, racist tinge to it that had much to do with the audience's expectations. Speaking from the position of the white privilege this passage first comments on the impossibility of mimesis in the case of *Othello*, and then discusses the casting decision based on a disparaging comparison between non-whiteness and baldness: two things rendering a man less than a man in the essentialist paradigm of masculinity dominant in Poland at that time and more than ever haunting the land as a nationalist spectre. Ultimately, Chrzanowski's *Othello* masked racism, masquerading its presence, but it did not make the slightest effort to address or alleviate it.

Demasking Blackface: Adam Ferency's Othello

Between Andrzej Chrzanowski's production and Krzysztof Warlikowski's work on *Othello* there were about ten other premieres of *Othello* in Poland, all strategising Othello's blackness in one way or another.¹⁵ The production that seems to stand out in the attempt to subversively use blackface as an intervention, comes from the director, whose theatre is characterised by the obsession with the scene as audience's mirror, and who problematises conflict as a major interpretive category (Niziolek 8). Since his *Taming of the Shrew* (Dramatyczny Theatre in Warsaw, 1998), Krzysztof Warlikowski's engagement

¹⁵ One needs to note Omar Sangare's performances in the role (Kujawińska Courtney, "Othello in Poland" 351-354).

with Shakespeare has been a scandalous tale of love and hate; the plays are fragmented and the plots disrupted in a manner typical for the postdramatic theatre, while the theatrical conventions are laid bare to reveal the ugly underbelly of even the most comic of plots: violence that pervades all life, all form, all drama (Niziołek). Still, this playwright-director relationship has been a steadfast one, as Warlikowski seems to have been preoccupied with Shakespeare the longest in the post-transformation Poland, with the record number of staged performances. Grzegorz Niziołek discusses Warlikowski's adaptations as a "reincarnation of tragedy in the spirit of photography," explaining this obsession as follows: "Warlikowski always draws out a family motif, even if it is not an obvious one at the first reading. *Hamlet*, *The Tempest* [...] are for him family dramas" (qtd in Drobnik-Rogers 47). What about *Othello*, the family drama in Shakespeare's oeuvre?

Warlikowski's presentist interpretation of *Othello* remains a part of a larger whole: a five-hour-long performance consisting of scenes from *King Lear*, *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*, all based on the 1990s translations by Stanisław Barańczak; John Maxwell Coetzee's novels and monologues written by Wajdie Mouawadie. It was put together in 2011 and premiered in Liège and Warsaw.¹⁶ The outcome of the joint effort by Les Théâtres de la Ville de Luxembourg and Parisian Théâtre National de Chaillot, as well as the Prospero network, the production, which toured Europe between 2011-2012, was presented in Hong Kong in 2014, and won the best 2012 Polish theatre production award at the 5th Divine Comedy Festival in Krakow, and in 2018 the International Shakespeare Prize for original approach to Shakespeare at the International Shakespeare Festival in Craiova, Romania.¹⁷ This "trilogy of the excluded" (Śmiechowicz 116) is interspersed with quotes including passages from Johnathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*; *Soul on Ice*, a manifesto of the ex-Black Panther, serial rapist, reformed Marxist, Eldridge Cleaver. The production remains structurally dependent on John Maxwell Coetzee's narratives and three monologues commissioned by Warlikowski from the Lebanese-Canadian author Wajdie Mouwade ("Portia's Gender,"

¹⁶ *Opowieści afrykańskie według Szekspira*. Premiere: Oct 5, 2011, Liège, 2 Dec 2011 Dramatyczny Theatre, Warsaw. Direction: Krzysztof Warlikowski, Set design: Małgorzata Szcześniak, music: Paweł Mykietyn. "African Tales by Shakespeare," MIT Global Shakespeares Video & Performance Archive, <https://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/african-tales-by-shakespeare-warlikowski-krzysztof-2011/#video=african-tales-by-shakespeare-trailer>

¹⁷ Network of six European theatres working to promote European heritage: Théâtre de la Place, Liège (Belgium), Théâtre National de Bretagne, Rennes (France), Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz, Berlin (Germany), Emilia Romagna Teatro Fondazione, Modena (Italy), Fundação Centro Cultural de Belém, Lisbon (Portugal), Tukivan Teatteritryn Keskus, Tampere (Finland).

“Desdemona’s Arm,” and “Cordelia”), while visually it heavily relies on allusions to Art Siegelmann’s *Maus* and Kurosawa Akira’s *Ikiru*.

All these intertexts work to destabilize the centrality of Shakespeare’s plays; what is presented to the audience in lieu of a dramatic theatre is an intermedial sequence of scenes which pit passages from *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello* and *King Lear* against a choir of contemporary voices. As a review by Constant Meijers notes, even though the title seems to suggest an obvious “African connection” (Meijers online), that link is largely symbolic and remains enmeshed in the palimpsestic region of stereotyped presuppositions and intertextual allusions. Magdalena Figzał-Janikowska argues about the production poster and the title, which in itself alludes to Doris Lessing’s and Coetzee’s writings, that both of them point in the direction of colonized “Africa” (616), which in the European cultural imaginary has for a long time occupied the function of a phantasmatic realm, onto which repressed desires of “wild Europeans” have been projected (Poster description, Raster Gallery online). The poster commissioned for the Nowy Theatre from a Polish artist, Zbigniew Libera, includes three figures, all of them exoticised (“Zbigniew Libera” online): an Asian female tourist and two European “savages” all gazing ahead, as if turning the colonizing anthropological gaze of the onlooker against itself. The author of *Lego. Concentration Camp* (1994) and the precursor of Critical art, Libera positions the dressed body of the tourist in the foreground, against the backdrop of the two completely naked white male bodies covered in what seems to resemble tribal patterns.¹⁸ What is significant is that juxtaposition which reveals an unexpected vulnerability of the painted youngsters, who strike an ethnographically-loaded pose of “native savages,” while their partially retained whiteness seems but one of the patterns covering their skin. Such an anti-heroic presentation of the white male body from a quasi-ethnographic perspective is a cultural taboo, as evidenced by the uproar the poster instigated in Warsaw.¹⁹ This confrontational image offers a representation that on the global cultural scene may well be tied with a wide array of outraged reactions, as it was in Poland; however, Polish far-right criticism focused first and foremost on the

¹⁸ The film from the phot shoot is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3VPo0rkBKA0>; the close-ups show how artificial the white and all the other colours really are.

¹⁹ In his discussion of Libera’s art both Piotr Piotrowski and Jakub Momro point to significance of transgressing the boundaries of representational taboos and cultural prohibitions as formative for Libera’s art. The poster does seem to operate on the force of anarchy understood as a lack of responsibility *against* institutions that demand obeisance to diverse social norms; its provocation evokes confusion and possibly also shame as a reaction typical for “cringe art” (Momro online).

attempt to colonise the white bodies, rendered vulnerable by the exposition of the male genitalia to the general public [sic].²⁰

The poster does indeed seem to invite “interpretations leading to the (so-far) unsettled colonialism and inability to have an honest, intercultural dialogue (especially in the relationship between an oppressor and a conquered victim)” (Śmiechowicz 115); the issue of such difficult (power) relations seems to function as a leitmotif for both Libera’s work and the play it came to represent. What emerges as one of the principles organising both, is the focus on the hegemonic gaze, whose force is magnified via the use of the power/knowledge visually-oriented scenarios: a quasi-ethnographic representation of the hegemonic bodies in the case of the poster; the lab-like setting, as well as the dependence on the intermedial in the case of the production which, admittedly, uses Shakespeare’s plays as “dramaturgical schemata, like a myth transported out of the classical anthropological structures of Claude Lévi-Strauss to show patterns of behaviour in extreme situations” (Soszyński online).

A review at home recognizes both the “African connection” and the unifying principle behind the vertiginous collage of intertexts:

Warlikowski has his own vision of a human being. It is a creature with a burden inscribed into its being, be it age, race or religion. However, it does not require cleansing. It accepts the burden and wants to be respected together with it. But that call for respect is too desperate. [...] Black Othello [...] expects recognition from the society as well as reverence from his white wife, Desdemona. Demanding respect blocks insight of these heroes: they fail to notice the feelings of their loved ones, their daughters or wives. They are thus guilty of inflicting suffering and emotional torture. Pain can be caused to others, also by inflicting it on oneself. You get the impression that the characters do not have a soul that is somehow responsible for emotions and ethics. There is only a body that has been abused and worn out, that hurts. Corporeality is related exclusively to suffering. The title is puzzling, however. Where to classify these “African tales”? [...] Desdemona turns into a wild animal during her dance; she gives his monologue to the animal (the dog). [...] Maybe it is the ritual creation of a new identity [...]? Where are all the tales? Where is Africa? (Pyrkosz online)

All three main characters are played by one and the same actor, Adam Ferency, and all undergo a reductive metamorphosis as a result of the operations of the hegemonic culture represented in the case of Othello by the hostile whites; just

²⁰ Libera himself openly admits that he wanted to create a reverse of the images of the Nuba tribe taken by Leni Riefenstahl upon her visits to Sudan and published in German as an illustrations book *Die Nuba* in the 1970’s: where these images showed perfection typical for fascist aesthetics, he was striving to show imperfection, offering instead of a gigantic “black phallus” a “little white cock”, “shrivelled from cold” (Libera. Interview with Urbaniak online).

like Shylock and Lear, Othello gradually sheds all the semblance of culturedness to reveal the truth of bare life, a state of existential exclusion and loneliness which renders them at once larger-than-life and singular in their suffering (Lease). Still, the larger context activated by the use of Coetzee's writing as a major frame of reference, does not invoke only the consequences of social exclusion, racial segregation and violence (Figzał-Janikowska), but points also to the issue of collective guilt. Figzał-Janikowska justly notes that in this adaptation even Cassio and Emilia are not allies; Iago, who carasses Othello's body as his masseur, tells racist jokes known to the Polish audience;²¹ Othello's stage appearance is accompanied by passages from *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver, and it is Iago who delivers Cleaver's shocking parable of the white Omnipotent Administrator and the black Supermasculine Menial:

I'm still going to be the Brain and you're still the Body. But from now on, you do all the flexing but I'll do all the fucking. The Brain must control the Body. I will have access to the white woman and I will have access to the black woman. The black woman will have access to you but she will also have access to me. I forbid you access to the white woman. [...] By subjecting your manhood to the control of my will, I shall control you" (Cleaver 193-194; qtd also in Figzał-Janikowska)

The process of subjection to othering from the white hegemonic gaze and white anxiety over the perceived conflict connected with the possession of white female bodies becomes apparent also in the video installation opening Warlikowski's *Othello*. The installation consists of an animated sequence, in which a black man and a white woman are having sex in a public restroom and are caught by a white male, and is offered as an introduction to the *Othello*-theme as a provocation for the audience: Who is to be offended by the long animated sex-tape with Desdemona and Othello loudly making out in front of the camera, with Desdemona making allusions to Othello's size and asking: Is that what you expect? Is this enough for you? The ideas of miscegenation and interracial coupling are unmistakably there in the installation to test the reaction of the viewers, as attested by the negative reviews in the right-wing press that, again significantly, keep mum on the issues of race and ethnicity as such, but raise hell for Warlikowski's attempt to "castrate the *male* civilisation" (Cieślak online, *italics mine*). The threat of castration does not come from women, however, as they are positioned in this production as the ultimate abject. It is the outcome of the obsessive focus on the bodies that remain in an antagonistic

²¹ Unfortunately, I did not come across any international reviews that would discuss *Othello* sequence in detail, so it is impossible for me to relate whether these were repeated verbatim or changed to their functional equivalents.

relationship with the normative phallo-logocentric vision of white hegemony; this cultural anxiety remains fixated on the desire for control leading to annihilation, as evidenced by Iago who does away with his repressed desire by cutting masked Cassio's throat in Othello's stead.²² The installation remains in stark contrast with the onstage presentation of the subtle relationship between Desdemona and Othello. Significantly, Desdemona's death is not presented as the direct outcome of Othello's actions, but as a result of the social exclusion she is subjected to once she starts wearing her bandana (the handkerchief?) and when she enters the society as Othello's wife (Figzał-Janikowska). The sense of physical separation and fragmentation that both Othello and Desdemona come to experience stems from the social and linguistic interventions undertaken by the hostile white bodies. Othello is being viewed and surveilled: "the white gaze, the only valid one, is already dissecting me. I am fixed" (Fanon 95).

Characteristically for the male subject undergoing racialisation in the crucible of linguistic interpellation and hegemonic gazing ("Look! A Negro!," Fanon 89), Othello is interpellated in his exchange with Iago as the Black Menial; the force of that interpellation pushes him into accepting categories used to describe him, even though he struggles to reject this totalising view. The jokes, where the word "murzyn" is repeated *ad nauseam*, the social expectations concerning the lack of "civilised body" expressed in the video installation, and the group scenes with Emilia, Iago and Cassio; all these come to bear on Othello and his relationship with Desdemona. As Achille Mbembe writes: "For everything, or nearly everything, encouraged the colonized peoples to inhabit as their skin and their truth the fiction that the Other had produced in their regard" (12). In Warlikowski's vision of "the world of people without bonds" (Mbembe 14) the actor's body becomes a surface for such a fiction, created with the use of blatantly theatrical blackface convention. The very conscious abuse of that tradition reveals the politically charged illusion of naturalness in the complex history of *Othello* performance, and possibly even goes as far as to suggest that race is only skin-deep, a flash of melatonin—or makeup. Throughout the *Othello* sequence Ferency's blackened face and hands do remain in stark contrast with the unpainted rest of his body, as noted by Małgorzata Grzegorzewska:

An unobvious [...] image of Othello: Elizabethan audience was not able to see a black actor, but a soot-painted white man. Warlikowski reminds us about that, making us face an Othello, whose white torso and arms are grotesquely contrasted with his black-painted hands and cleavage [sic] (online).

²² In Warlikowski's adaptation Iago represses his desire for the gay Cassio, who in the final scene becomes additionally othered by the black mask.

If there is grotesqueness in the way that the character is constructed, it comes attached to the fact that Ferency's blackface situates the performance beyond the realist and comic tradition present in various forms on European stages. This anti-realist use of blackface seems to point to the fragmentariness of the body, whose identity remains in a state of flux throughout the performance. Othello's racialisation is shown to be a gradual process that emerges through the use of the blackface; the "everyday racism" of Polish Negro jokes; the very structure of Shakespeare's play, the reliance on such hypotexts as Coetzee's and Eldridge's writings, and the interpellation of the viewer as the possible addressee of Desdemona's questions about the ends of the viewer's sensual pleasure. Repeatedly displaying his blackened hands and face against the rest of the un-blackened body, Ferency explodes the mimetic potential of blackface and its intention to dehumanise; what it seems to call for instead is to castigate the dehumanising practices and discourses that come to create "Othello" in the first place. This process of construction of Othello as a racialised subject evokes confusion and a sense of shame at least in some of the audience, as the viewers become entangled in the questions that on occasion accompany visions of violence on the stage, such as their own situatedness as violence perpetrators, bystanders and/or witnesses (Duggan). Warlikowski's production seems to be quite effective in provoking the audience to question their assumptions about racial stereotypes:

African Tales According to Shakespeare is a disgracing, disgraced, and perhaps even dishonorable performance. It is a performance in which the entire narrative remains in the power of the discourse of disgrace: it is disgrace that is bound to express the ineffable: the worst, the unbearable, the blasphemous, the incestuous. *Tales* are saturated with shame; they are as if an attempt to secure the traces it leaves and the indescribable confusion it causes. (Radecki online)

Such a sense of shame can potentially lead to a recognition of racial stigmatisation as wounding, and can have a potentially corrective effect (Ahmed 195), especially on those less obvious forms of racism present in such societies as Poland, where despite the lack of colonial history involving black communities, whiteness is treated as an unthinking, privileged position (Eddo-Lodge).

It seems significant that the majority of critical responses in Poland resonate more with the first and the third part of the production, while the overseas commentaries tend to point to the universalising character of the whole. Obviously, one could suggest that the archetypal forms of racism in Poland are tied to anti-semitism, while old age and illness remain among strong cultural taboos; this, however, is not the entire picture, as the omission seems to be a result of a blank spot in the perception of racism in Poland. Blackface, present not only in the North American minstrel shows, but in other forms of

entertainment, also in Europe, plays on stereotypes and feeds on cultural anxieties surrounding blackness by taming it through ridicule. This difficult heritage is present in Poland as well, albeit in an ostensibly less hostile form: in the brownface and blackface used in the Polish theatre and cinema, also in the context of Shakespeare. One needs to be aware of the fact that in the globalised world, the historical legacies of blackface will come to intrude upon such ostensibly “innocent” mimetic traditions.²³

[F]ew global cultures have been isolated from encounters with blackface and that do not have its depictions that are intrinsic of racialized humor, colonized shaming, and the overall humiliation of a certain portion of humanity. [...] The USA exemplifies a well-defined history that has appropriated, problematized, and continues to challenge the peculiarity of blackface. New and imported representations of blackface emigrating from other global cultures [...] inadvertently evoke legacies of American slavery, legal segregation, and racialized perceptions of blackness associated with inferiority. (Reyes 525).

Blackface as a subversive act seems to be inserted into Warlikowski's production not only as a cultural allusion to the early modern history of staging the play, but also as a painful social experiment. The use of black paint creates a sense of double inscription on Ferency's body, as a construct that points to a theatrical illusion of “race” and disappoints it at the same time. Thus, it serves as a parody of race relations, installing them and subverting them in a political representation which demystifies the dominant ideology of whiteness, “signal[ling] how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference” (Hutcheon 93). Warlikowski's take on *Othello* parodies the performance history of the play, at once addressing the traditional presuppositions about the body of the actor playing Othello, the play as such, and the image of the society that looks at itself through the very critical mirror this production offers. One could therefore risk the conclusion that Warlikowski's production seems to respond to “an innovative call to action for alternative performances with the ‘demasking’ of blackface,” as “demasking or erasing the demeaning social identity of blackface” can lead to a change in social relations (Reyes 525).

Conclusion: On Uneasiness

Even though Poland is a country in which the American minstrel shows remain relatively unknown, blackface and brownface performances occur both in theatre and in other media with some regularity. Their very existence in the Polish

²³ Innocent as in Gloria Wekker's “white innocence”.

contemporary cultural imaginary has to provoke questions about racial wounding that is connected with stereotyping blackness and rendering stereotypical images part and parcel of the entertainment industry. Cultural anxiety surrounding *Othello* in Poland is on a microscale present already in the dilemma surrounding the very choice of the lexemes used by translators to address the main character's ethnic origin. Józef Paszkowski's first complete Polish translation of the play seems to be very much context-dependent in this respect, and utilises the existing terminology, while mobilising its gently, ambiguously generalized racist connotations. The two performances chosen to discuss the usage of blackface in the stage history of *Othello* in Poland offer two competing strategies of its deployment. Chrzanowski's 1918/1984 universalising *Othello* is a performance, in which the racial issues are toned down, the brownface almost eliminating them from the adaptation. Racial struggle is replaced with the political conflict between the individual and the oppressive regime, but that very choice to annul "race" is a whitewashing political gesture in itself. Warlikowski's "trilogy of the excluded" attacks the issue of race head-on, critiquing it as one of the many ways, in which we imprison ourselves and others in the cultural confines of whatever we think human nature is. Through its direct critique of the tradition of blackface and the artificially constructed image of Othello, Warlikowski's *African Tales According to Shakespeare* provides a painful recognition of the race trouble in the contemporary world. This theatrical intervention, coming from a director who does not occupy a position of cultural hegemony either in Europe or elsewhere,²⁴ risks the subversive use of blackface to urge a change in the emotive scripts surrounding figures of the excluded. These two theatrical adaptations reveal that Othello's "colour" in Poland has been first and foremost, political, even though they offer starkly different understandings of what the political might mean.

Warlikowski's production can be read hand-in-hand with Mbembe's reflection on politics of hostility; only by experiencing oppression can we understand that we need uneasiness as a fundamental intellectual position which makes us interrogate structures of power and see them for what they are: brutal hypocrisy of those who want to retain their power at all cost. For Mbembe the way out of the *bellum omnium contra omnes* is care. Only when we feel for others, only when we become witness to their plight, willing to share the responsibility for our transient presence in the violent world, do we create the conditions for seeing faces of enemies as faces of humans: "This experience of presence and distance, of solidarity and detachment, but never of indifference—let us call it the ethics of the passerby" (190).

²⁴ I understand, though, that his international success can be read as the outcome of white privilege.

There is no extensive discussion on the use of brownface and blackface in the Polish theatre that I have encountered so far, neither is race regularly employed as an object of academic inquiry at Polish universities. Franz Fanon's writings have just begun to be translated *in extenso*, and any major discussion on the presence of black minorities in public discourse is still in the future. Yet, recent newspaper articles and reports created as an echo of the Black Lives Matter movement in the US demonstrate that even though Poland has been an ethnically homogenous country, institutional racism and everyday racism do stigmatise individuals, hurting children and adults in a plethora of disturbing ways (Balogun and Joseph-Salisbury). The numbers of black Poles have been on the rise in recent years, just as the numbers of international students and researchers who come to Poland to study and work, and who are increasingly becoming the objects of racially motivated attacks, for which the populist political discourse has to be held accountable (Krzyżanowski). In writing this article I kept asking myself, whether I have the right to speak on the subject of racism in Poland at all, considering the fact that I have not been subjected to it. Yet, having been a witness of racial violence, I refuse to be forced into silence by such dilemmas, even though both the subject and my positioning remain uneasy.

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