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Introduction: Shakespeare, Blackface and Performance A Global Perspective

When we were invited in 2019 by the editors of *Multicultural Shakespeare* to guest edit a special issue on a topic that would be of international significance, we did not have to think very hard or long, as the request aligned with one of our main research interests: racism, blackface and performance. Shakespearean performances have employed racial prosthetics since the Elizabethan period, but the intervening 400 years since Shakespeare's lifetime have seen the symbolic, social, and performance meanings of blackface and its relation to xenophobia, institutional racism and populism change. Over the past years these topics have gained even more significance and worldwide attention, and 2020 accelerated interests in systemic racism and the histories and performances that foster and enable its perpetuation. The brutal murder of George Floyd in May 2020 inspired even more urgent calls for analyses of systemic, anti-black racism.

As the mission of *Multicultural Shakespeare* (formerly *Shakespeare Worldwide*) aims to broaden scholarly perspectives beyond an Anglophone approach, we sent out a call for papers inviting scholars to analyse specific uses of blackface in both local and global contexts across the world. We were particularly interested in essays that would explore specific political, social, and cultural issues regarding institutional racism and their relations to blackface traditions both inside and outside the theatre. Interest in this topic has increased over the past decades and is currently accelerating and deepening, with recent and forthcoming publications on the subject not only moving beyond the Anglophone context but also aiming to contextualise the interactions between institutional racism, blackface, performance and the socio-political context (Heijes, 2020; Valls-Russell and Sokolova, 2021; Thompson, 2021a, Thompson, 2021b).

When we launched our call for papers for this special issue of *Multicultural Shakespeare*, we had no idea that so many authors would submit their papers. The international interest in blackface revealed just how pervasive

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the performance trope became in the 19th, 20th, and now 21st centuries. In the end, we decided on two essays that have a more historicist perspective, placing their analysis within the seventeenth-century context of early modern England. The remaining seven essays take a more presentist approach and analyse the interactions between blackface on the Shakespearean stage, the more general employment of blackface tropes and the historical, political, cultural and educational contexts in seven non-Anglophone countries, respectively Germany, Italy, Japan, Kuwait, Albania, Chile and Poland. As a group, these essays not only present a deeper understanding of the variety of approaches to Shakespeare and blackface across the globe, but also offer greater nuance than the Anglo-American domination of these discussions in Shakespeare studies. At the same time, we are painfully aware that there are still many blanks to fill in, and we hope that this special issue may also serve as a call for further research. We encourage authors to continue working on this important and topical area of Shakespeare studies.

Of the two historicist essays, the first takes us back to the Banqueting Hall of Whitehall Palace on 6 January 1605, when *The Masque of Blackness* by Ben Jonson was performed at the Jacobean Court, slightly more than two months after the first recorded performance of *Othello* at Whitehall by the King's Men. Rather than, as is almost traditional, discussing the masque in conjunction with *Othello*, its Jacobean counterpart in performing blackness, Pascale Aebischer and Victoria Sparey focus solely on the masque, and in particular on Inigo Jones's stage design and Queen Anna's role, James I's Queen Consort, who commissioned the masque. Their essay effectively reinterprets Queen Anna's blackface appearance in the masque. Without diminishing Anna's complicity in her contribution to the racist narrative, the authors complicate the focus by analysing the use and meaning of her six-month pregnant body and the black, blue and white make-up which helped to unsettle the traditional black-and-white that supported King James's white, male, 'British' national idea of supremacy.

Sensory studies have over the past years gradually developed into a somewhat more mature field of research in Shakespeare studies. Although the subject of scent has attracted a fair amount of attention, the interaction between blackface make-up, olfactory technology used on stage and the broader racial discourses in early modern society is an area that deserves further exploration. In his essay, Benjamin Steingass argues that the Globe's pungent atmosphere, Othello's scented black body and the use of pungent dye in fabrics on stage combined to build up and invent a bodily revulsion towards Othello amongst the early modern audience. We hope this essay might encourage other researchers to explore this highly sensitive area of olfactory studies, moving beyond the confines of an historicist approach. Recent, more general studies, such as *The Smell of Slavery: Olfactory Racism and the Atlantic World* (Kettler, 2020),

might also help to bring in an interdisciplinary perspective that extends beyond the early modern period.

Moving to discuss racism and blackface on the Shakespeare stage in more recent history, Alessandra Bassey examines three productions of *Othello* in Nazi Germany between 1935 and 1944, and one production in pre-annexation Austria. The author has uncovered previously ignored archival material in the cities where the productions took place—Berlin (1939, 1944), Frankfurt (1935) and Vienna (1935). Focusing on the use of lighter make-up, Bassey frames her analysis in the political context of the rise of the Nazi regime, in the contradictory policies towards black people in Nazi Germany, and in the wider theatrical context, by including some pre-Nazi, Weimar productions of the play. Bassey argues that the popular success of *Othello* productions during the Nazi period, the admiration for his soldierly attributes and the avoidance of blackface in favour of a more light-skinned Berber portrayal reflects the regime's own perfidious and ambivalent attitude towards Sub-Saharan Africans, Berbers and mixed-race people in Germany.

In the next essay, Shaul Bassi and Igiaba Scego also examine *Othello* within the context of the rise of fascism in the 1930s, but place it within a wider narrative of Italian productions of *Othello* and blackface traditions. While the authors are critical of blackface and advocate its discontinuation, they also demonstrate the intricate relationship between the use of blackface and the colonial and postcolonial relationship between Italy and Africa. They stress the importance of considering both the analogies, the entanglements and the differences between the legacy of blackface in Italy and the (better known) American history of blackface. Presenting a well-documented historical and political overview of blackface and racism in Italian society and its colonial legacy, they focus on five productions of *Othello* as case studies to examine the continuities and discontinuities in Italian blackface: Tommaso Salvini, Pietro Sharoff, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Carmelo Bene and Elio De Capitani. The authors argue that De Capitani's *Othello* (2016) is exemplary of the Italian blackface palimpsest as an unambiguously antiracist production; it is in this apparent contradiction, which the authors examine in detail in their essay, that they build on the specific, complex Italian context, a context which is only further complicated by the growing popularity of African-American popular culture and African and African-American literature in contemporary Italy.

In the next essay, Kitamura Sae discusses a series of twenty-first-century productions of *Othello* on the Japanese stage and how they performed racial otherness through blackface. The author situates her analysis in the wider Japanese theatrical context, discussing non-Shakespearean theatrical productions that contained instances of blackface within the general context of Japanese society. Sae points out differences in blackface traditions and the use of black actors on stage between Anglophone countries and Japan, a society that

considers itself largely homogeneous in terms of race and ethnicity. In this context, it is not only the apparent lack of black actors but also the seeming unfamiliarity of audience members with the racial discourses and tensions in North America and Europe that has driven Japanese theatre to find new strategies to explore the racial tensions in *Othello* and to modify them for a twenty-first century Japanese audience. In analysing these strategies, Sae demonstrates how theatre companies have changed the focus from racism to lookism, how they focused on jealousy and alienation rather than on race, and how they used different acting styles or changed Othello's race to differentiate him. An intriguing example is the analysis of the 2018 production by Shimodate Kazumi, which depicts Othello as an Ainu general and Desdemona as a Japanese woman born to a family of samurai. It was the first time the controversial, racial discrimination against the Ainu people, living on the northernmost island, had been adapted in the play to address attitudes towards Japan's own minorities.

The sixth essay, by Katherine Hennessey, builds on a fascinating pedagogical case study, a class on Shakespeare that the author taught at the American University of Kuwait during the Fall semester of 2019. In discussing *Othello*, a play rarely researched or performed in Kuwait, Hennessey hoped to help students gain a sense of the history and the debates surrounding blackface, racism and *Othello*, not only in the US but also in relation to the region's recent blackface controversies and racial discrimination. Hennessey places this debate within the wider context of blackface traditions in Arab countries, drawing a distinction between Arab blackface that is explicitly intended as demeaning and the use of blackface in Arab performances, such as that in Farid Shawqi's *Antara*, which does not seem to be intentionally malicious. Hennessey points out how this distinction does not condone the use of blackface, but rather serves to mirror the Arab socio-political context, which she argues has become cruder and more insensitive over time. Hennessey reflects how, contrary to expectations, the (generally Anglophone) debate on the origins and consequences of blackface have not led to a regional awareness, which makes her classroom in Kuwait a productive space for a necessary and, at times, uncomfortable discussion on blackface and racism.

The next essay, by Marinela Golemi, examines the history of *Othello* in Albania. Translated into Albanian for the first time in 1916 by Fan Noli, *Othello* was not staged until 1953. Hoping to combat racial discrimination in Albania, Noli drew connections between Othello's experiences in Venice and the Albanophobic experiences of Albanian immigrants. *Othello* was also used to address ethno-racial tensions between Albanians and Turks, northern and southern Albanians, and Albanians of color and white Albanians. A.J. Ricko's 1953 National Theatre of Albania production was premised on the belief that there is an anti-racist power inherent within Shakespeare's play. In the end, however, the race-based rhetoric in the Albanian language, the use of blackface

make-up in performance, and the logic and rhetoric of Shakespeare's play itself challenged these lofty goals for race-healing.

In an essay that builds on an impressive array of historical sources, travellers' records, interviews and other documentation, Paula Baldwin Lind draws a fascinating portrait of the evolvement of Chilean blackface in *Othello*, focusing in particular on the first *Othello* in the country, in 1818, and the latest *Othello* that ran from 2012 to 2020. The author argues that the early nineteenth-century production leaned strongly on the Spanish stage traditions at the time, presenting Othello in the (Spanish) image of the Moor and mirroring Spanish racism during the sixteenth century and afterwards. The latest production, directed by Jaime Lorca, was set against the background of the explosive growth of migration from Latin America and the Caribbean, Haiti in particular, as black people became part of everyday life in Chile. In her essay, the author moves beyond a mere survey of *Othellos* to argue that the racial impersonations and employment of blackface in *Othello* have activated an awareness of racism and fears of miscegenation among audiences in Chile, both enabling and deconstructing racial thinking simultaneously.

In the final essay, Anna Kowalcze-Pawlik analyses the representation of Othello both on the page and the stage in Poland, an ethnically relatively homogenous country. While American minstrelsy is relatively unknown in Poland, the use of blackface and stereotyping blackness is not uncommon both in the theatre and other media. Situating her essay in the wider context of Polish society, Kowalcze-Pawlik builds her argument on three specific case studies: the nineteenth-century translation of *Othello* by Józef Paszkowski and two theatre adaptations, the 1981/1984 televised *Othello* by Andrzej Chrzanowski and the 2011 post-Communist *African Tales Based on Shakespeare*, a five-hour production based on *King Lear*, *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*. The author first examines the etymology and lexemes in the translation process and the far-ranging influence this exerted on the public discourse on racism. In her examination of the two adaptations, Kowalcze-Pawlik analyses and comments on the use of brownface and blackface in these two productions and how they seem to work in contrasting ways, offering evidence both for supporting and challenging the audience's racial thinking.

By way of some final words, we would like to express our deep-felt gratitude to the authors for their fascinating research, to the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments which have helped the authors in further improving their essays, to the editorial assistants for helping us in the process, and to the editors-in-chief for inviting us and giving us so much freedom to compose this special issue. It has been an incredible joy and privilege to have been able to work with such a variety of enthusiastic scholars. In an era in which the Humanities and Shakespeare Studies are often faced with budget cuts and increasingly have to defend their relevance, we are confident that the authors in

this special issue have demonstrated the deep and intricate entanglements between theatre and the world around. Now more than ever, deep cultural analysis is important for today's societies around the globe.

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