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The Blackfaced Bard: Returning to Shakespeare or Leaving Him?

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As Dymphna Callaghan has argued, “Othello was a white man” (Callaghan 75–96). That is, he was originally created for, and performed by, the white Renaissance actor Richard Burbage. Despite the modern production history to the contrary—with its long line of famous black actors performing the eponymous role—the part and the play were not written for black or even dark skinned actors. Instead, Othello was a white man in blackface makeup. In turn, Elise Marks has posited that black actors who play Othello have been received more coolly by film and theatre reviewers than white actors because “only a non-African knows how to be the perfect African, at least for the emotional fantasy-use of a thrill-seeking white audience. A real black actor . . . has too much independent selfhood getting in the way” (Marks 117). Although Marks does specify how this “fantasy-use” performance of blackness ought to be staged in practical terms, several other scholars and practitioners have advocated for a return to blackface productions of *Othello*. Despite the fact that these scholars and practitioners disagree on theoretical grounds, they nonetheless come to similar practical conclusions: that Othello should not be performed by a black actor and, thus, blackface must be a viable performance option if productions of *Othello* are to continue.

I list four examples at length because it is important to analyze how these scholars and practitioners grapple with the factors that impact the semiotic significances of blackface performances of Shakespeare. For example, in 1997, Sheila Rose Bland, a freelance actor and director, argued that a modern performance of a:

blackfaced Othello would be seen by the audience, both black and white, as “other”—an outsider—a caricature. This would alienate and cause

discomfort to the audience. By casting “real” blacks to play Othello . . . Shakespeare’s original intent in writing *Othello* may well have been cloaked. . . . To see an actual black man kissing an actual white woman on stage is a powerful image—but one that misrepresents an even more powerful image on stage intended by Shakespeare: to see a white man in blackface kiss a white man in woman’s clothing. (Bland 31 & 38)

The following year, Hugh Quarshie, the celebrated black British actor, made a similar argument when addressing the University of Alabama Hudson Strode Theatre. Quarshie declared:

if a black actor plays Othello does he not risk making racial stereotypes seem legitimate and even true? When a black actor plays a role written for a white actor in black make-up and for a predominantly white audience, does he not encourage the white way, or rather the wrong way, of looking at black men. . . . Of all parts in the canon, perhaps Othello is the one which should most definitely not be played by a black actor. (Quarshie 5)

Likewise, Hugh Macrae Richmond has argued that “a more accurate title for the play would be *Iago*, acknowledging that, because of [the audience’s] superior knowledge of [Iago’s schemes], we can never identify fully with Othello’s overtly mistaken point of view” (Richmond 94–95). Because of this interpretation, Richmond questions the modern tradition of casting black actors to play Othello.

The irony is that such casting invites a non-aesthetic identification with the actors as truly representatives of the historical victims of just such condescension, which is potentially at odds with the author’s more objective intent, to display the tragic fact that racism may distort its victims’ own behavior. . . . [W]e might identify less with the emotional extravagance of Othello if we know he is not acted by someone of actual African descent. (Richmond 96)

More recently, Virginia Mason Vaughan has argued that “a major ingredient in the audience’s fascination with the Moor is the pleasure of seeing the white actor personate a black man and knowing that this is what he or she is seeing” (Vaughan 97). Acknowledging the pleasure of this “double consciousness” of viewing (98, 102),¹ Vaughan suggests:

While I would not go so far as Sheila Rose Bland and describe Shakespeare’s original *Othello* as a “minstrel show” with Iago in the role of Mr. Inerlocutor, cues in the text do call attention to the Moor as an imper-

sonation, sporadically reminding the audience that the actor's blackness is a façade. (Vaughan 94–95)

Thus, Vaughan concludes her book by advocating for “the Globe, the reconstructed Blackfriars in Staunton, Virginia, and other experimental theatres [to] consider offering selected blackface performances” (Vaughan 174).

After reading these calls for a return to blackfaced performances of Shakespeare, one must ask what the relationships are between known original practices, assumed authorial intentions, audience reception(s), and modern productions. What is the relationship between an original practice (a white actor playing Othello) and the authorial intent (Shakespeare's design for a white actor as Othello)? What should be the relationship between the assumed authorial intent and a modern production? And what is the relationship between practice and reception when modern blackfaced versions of *Othello* are produced? The scholars and practitioners cited above seem to swing between these discourses, alternating between investing intention, practice, and reception with the power to determine the semiotic significances of blackface in historical, cultural, and political terms. For instance, Sheila Bland is interested in “alienat[ing] and caus[ing] discomfort to the audience” by staging “Shakespeare's original intent.” Although Bland clearly employs the language of authorial intent, one should ask if/how a theatrical practice reveals authorial intent (Bland 31). Hugh Quarshie, on the other hand, focuses on the “white way, or rather the wrong way, of looking,” thereby emphasizing the power of audience reception to determine the semiotic significances of blackface (Quarshie 5). Nevertheless, he too conflates practice with intention when arguing that the role was “written for a white actor in black make-up.” While Hugh Macrae Richmond places the modern audience's “non-aesthetic identification” with the black actor as Othello in opposition to the “author's more objective intent,” practice and intent are still conflated in this discourse as well (Richmond 96). And finally, Virginia Mason Vaughan focuses primarily on reception—the “pleasure” that is experienced by the audience through the knowledge that the blackface enacted is an impersonation of blackness—but she also privileges “Shakespeare's original *Othello*” (Vaughan 94). It is unclear, however, if this privilege is achieved through the original practice, the authorial intent, or both.

This essay takes these disparate calls for the cessation of black actors as Othello seriously, asking how audiences will receive the use of blackface in a modern Shakespearean production. Shakespeare stands in the

center of this essay's spotlight not only because Shakespearean scholars and practitioners have been extremely vocal about the history of, and potential return to, blackface performances, but also because the power of Shakespeare's cultural capital intensifies the frequency with which convention, practice, and intention are entangled and collapsed. Despite the fact that in our post-structuralist world it is un-fashionable to approach texts and productions through the lens of authorial intention, the force of Shakespeare's cultural capital keeps intentionality active. Because of the tendency in popular culture to impart universally positive motives to Shakespeare, I am interested in analyzing the tensions between intention, practice, and reception when blackface is proposed for contemporary Shakespearean performances. As reception theorists like Susan Bennett have argued, race must not be ignored when analyzing the production-reception contract: it is a factor that influences production and reception *and* the relationship between the two (Bennett 166–203). An analysis of the performance of race in *Othello* highlights the warping effect of Shakespeare's cultural capital, and, thus, this essay strays far from Shakespeare at times to emphasize the unusual power of this effect.

Therefore, I begin with an examination of three recent examples of non-Shakespearean blackface performances to demonstrate the failure of intention to guarantee a particular kind of reception: one could call the desired reception “an opposition gaze”—a way of looking and analyzing that challenges traditional semiotic meanings and values.² Then I examine the ways legal theorists have addressed intention, practice, and reception, especially in artistic freedom cases involving public officials who have performed in blackface, to present the complex ways intention and reception have been theorized in legal terms. These seemingly disparate points of analysis enable a more complexly informed discussion of the potential, and potential pitfalls, for Shakespearean productions in blackface. Ultimately, I contend that the conflicting desires for a return to Shakespeare's original intent and for an appropriation of the cultural and political semiotics of blackface may signal the problems with Shakespeare and Shakespeare's cultural capital rather than any inherent problems with the performance of blackface itself.

Blackface in Performance: The Distance between Intention, Practice, and Reception

Three contemporary examples of non-Shakespearean blackface performances illustrate how challenging it is to attempt to control the semiotic

significances of a blackface performance. They demonstrate the failure of intention to guarantee specific responses from audiences. In 1981 the experimental New York City theatre troupe the Wooster Group put on *Route 1 & 9*, a production that melded scenes from Thornton Wilder's 1938 play *Our Town* with a reconstruction of Pigmeat Markham's black-faced comedy routine. Dewey "Pigmeat" Markham, of course, was a black minstrel comic who blackened up well into the 1940s. He is most well known for his "heayah come da judge" routines. I offer two different accounts of the *Route 1 & 9* controversy to emphasize the unusual tensions that arise in determining the significance of mimetic intention in blackface performances. The first comes from Errol Hill and James Hatch's *A History of African American Theatre*. Hatch writes of the 1981 performance:

Performed by four white actors in blackface, the piece generated a widely reported racial controversy. Because of the blackface segment, the New York State Council on the Arts cut Wooster's funding by 43 percent. . . . Comments by the director and one of the actresses provide a glimpse into how successfully the racist history of blackface had eluded both white women. (Hill and Hatch 445)

According to Hatch's assessment, the production got away from the "white women" who organized the show. Because of their naïveté, his argument follows, the "racist history of blackface eluded" them, revealing the problematic nature of their intentions. Hatch is careful not to condemn blackface outright. Instead, he relies on an argument based on intentionality. Hatch creates a space for the reader to imagine that he would welcome, perhaps even applaud, a blackface production that did take the "racist history of blackface" seriously. This subtext also implies that these "white women" unfortunately foiled this important opportunity. In other words, Hatch's analysis of their intentions affects his analysis of the production and its reception.

John Strausbaugh provides an entirely different account of the controversy surrounding the *Route 1 & 9* production. Here is Strausbaugh's assessment:

In 1981, even a very high-concept and well-intentioned use of blackface landed the experimental Wooster Group in trouble. . . . The idea was to comment on Wilder's lily-white portrait of a "typical" American town, not to make fun of Black people, but some critics and audience members missed the point entirely. (Strausbaugh 38)

For Strausbaugh, unlike Hatch, the intentions of the Wooster Group's organizers were pure: "not to make fun of Black people." The problem, according to Strausbaugh, rested squarely on the shoulders of the "critics and audience members [who] missed the point." For their diametrically opposed receptions and assessments of *Route 1 & 9*, Hatch and Strausbaugh nevertheless implicitly agree that intentionality is central to interpreting the semiotic meaning of a blackface production. Both return to their ideas of the intentions of the creators of *Route 1 & 9*. But as must become clear from their opposing interpretations of the Wooster Group's intentions, intentionality is always subject to interpretation in production. Even artists themselves revisit their own conceptions of their intentions after performing something in front of an audience.

One need only think of my second example, the scandal involving the comedian Dave Chappelle, to find a concrete example of this. As many will recall, in November 2004, Chappelle was taping a sketch for his television show in which he appeared in blackface when he suddenly left the set and subsequently fled the country without explanation. In the first interview following his departure, Christopher Farley explains that Chappelle:

thought the sketch was funny, the kind of thing his friends would laugh at. But at the taping, one spectator, a white man, laughed particularly loud and long. His laughter struck Chappelle as wrong, and he wondered if the new season of his show had gone from sending up stereotypes to merely reinforcing them. "When he laughed, it made me uncomfortable," says Chappelle. "As a matter of fact, that was the last thing I shot before I told myself I gotta take a fucking time out after this. Because my head almost exploded." (Farley)

Although Chappelle's intentions were to send up stereotypes, his comments seem to indicate that he feared two distinct but interrelated problems. First, he expresses a fear that he succumbed to a simplistic reinforcement of racial stereotypes: that he internalized and reproduced racist portrayals of blacks. This fear is familiar and has been explored in many plays, novels, films, and, of course, literary and performance criticism. In fact, one might even label it the "Othello Syndrome" because *Othello* is one of the first Western texts to demonstrate the potential violent outcome of internalizing justifications for bigotry. Chappelle's second fear, however, is slightly more complicated and less familiar. He seems to fear that even if his intentions are pure—sending up stereotypes instead of reinforcing them—he will not be able to control the reception of the im-

ages he creates. He cannot control why white (or black) spectators laugh *or even* how “loud and long” they laugh.

As many journalists and academics have noted, Chappelle’s story eerily brings to life my third example, Spike Lee’s 2000 film *Bamboozled*, in which a black television writer attempts to write a modern day minstrel show satirizing the American desire for portrayals of unsuccessful blacks. In the film, the black writer, Pierre Delacroix (played by Damon Wayans), explains that his producer:

wants a coon show so that’s what I intend to give him. The show will be so negative, so offensive, and racist. Hence, I will prove my point. The point being that [he], the network, does not want to see Negroes on television unless they are buffoons. (*Bamboozled*)

Unfortunately for Delacroix, “Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show” proves a huge success with both white and black audiences. As a project that satirizes almost every figure within it, the film asks its audience to think about the exact nature of Delacroix’s motives, his intentions. Although he verbalizes an intent to send up stereotypical portrayals of blacks, he also seems to have internalized some of the racist values of white America: he changes his name; he puts on an affected accent; he seems to disavow his family, etc. And yet, it is not simply Delacroix’s mixed motives—his mixed intentions—that enable the success of the minstrel show. Rather, the film hauntingly portrays the shooting of the pilot episode in which Delacroix watches, expecting the audience to be outraged by the resurrection of these blackfaced minstrel portrayals. While the audience is at first shocked, they come to love it by the end of the episode, applauding wildly. The film powerfully asks the viewer to think about who/what controls the semiotic significances of blackface in historical, cultural, and political terms.

When explaining the satirical flip of the film, however, Spike Lee eschews the discourses of both intention and reception. Instead, Lee says, “with a twist of fate, they [‘the audience and American popular culture’] end up loving this racist, stereotypical show” (Lee). By employing the notion of “fate” in this instance, Lee unwittingly renders political, cultural, and social engagement/action powerless because he ascribes the change to an uncontrollable cosmic force. Lee’s rhetoric about fate signals his unwillingness to declare what the relationships between intention, practice, and reception are when blackface is employed. As W. J. T. Mitchell argues:

Bamboozled is a metapicture—a picture about pictures, a picture that conducts a self-conscious inquiry into the life of images. . . . [Spike Lee] talks sometimes as if he had achieved a standpoint outside the “madness” of images, the “distorted” images of film and television. And yet if there is one thing *Bamboozled* makes clear, it is just how difficult it is to find this critical standpoint, to achieve a “just estimation” of images that transcends distortion and madness. (Mitchell 301)

Mitchell argues that Lee’s rhetoric about *Bamboozled* being “outside the ‘madness’ of images” ignores the way the film itself presents the impossibility of achieving that outsider status. Building on Mitchell’s argument, I want to highlight the way Lee’s rhetoric also eschews distinguishing between intention, practice, and reception. Many of the initial negative critical responses criticized *Bamboozled* as “a mess” politically, rhetorically, and visually precisely because of the film’s reluctance to resolve the complex relationship between intention, practice, and reception (White 12).

Legal Theorists on Blackface and Intentionality

These recent examples of non-Shakespearean blackface, then, demonstrate the tensions between practice, intention, and reception. The assumed intention may not be clear to the audience or critic, as the Wooster Group’s *Route 1 & 9* exemplifies; the intention may not even be clear to the artist him/herself, as the Chappelle case illustrates; and the intention may prove completely irrelevant when certain images have “lives” of their own, as *Bamboozled* reveals.³ When calling for a return to blackface performances of *Othello*, critics sometimes invoke the history of minstrelsy and blackface in the United States, and they sometimes invoke the more recent history of minstrelsy that I discuss in the previous section, but they never invoke the legal history of blackface, artistic freedom, or public arts funding. Legal theorists, however, seem to pick up where W. J. T. Mitchell ends his analysis of *Bamboozled*: that is, they deliberately forgo discussions of intention when determining the semiotic significance of blackface performances. There are two different but related sets of legal cases that can inform this analysis: the first set involves the legality of dismissing public officials who have performed in blackface in public, and the second set involves the legality of regulating public arts funding for controversial pieces of art. An analysis of these legal cases and the legal theories that support them reveals how judges and legal theorists avoid analyses of intention. Although they often include discussions of the artists’ intentions, legal theorists time and again explicitly weigh the importance and significance of reception over the relevance of intentionality.

There are three recent cases involving public officials who have dressed and/or performed in blackface when they were off duty. In the first case, *Berger v. Battaglia*, a Baltimore police officer sued the Baltimore Police Commissioner for ordering him to cease appearing in public wearing blackface. Bobby Berger became a police officer in Baltimore in 1972. During much of his time as a police officer he performed off-duty as a singer, often appearing in blackface to sing Al Jolson songs (he specialized in "Mammy"). The police department had not received any complaints about his behavior until 1982 when he moved his routine to a bigger venue in a local Hilton Hotel. When members of the NAACP complained both at the hotel and through local media outlets, the police commissioner ordered Berger to cease his act "on pain of being found in violation of the department's rule prohibiting activity on the part of a member of the department that tends to reflect discredit upon himself or upon the department" (*Berger v. Battaglia*). Berger sued the police commissioner, arguing that his First Amendment rights (i.e., freedom of speech) were being violated. The initial ruling in 1983 by the district court ruled against Berger, but upon appeal, the United States Fourth Circuit reversed the district court's findings and ruled in favor of Berger. Later the Supreme Court refused to hear the case, thereby upholding the Circuit court's decision (1986).

The second case *In re Ellender* involves a judicial district court judge from Louisiana, Timothy Ellender, who went to a Halloween party in 2003 wearing an orange prison jumpsuit and handcuffs, which he borrowed from the local sheriff of his parish, a black afro wig, and blackface. He was escorted by his new wife, who was dressed as a police officer. When pictures of the judge in blackface and prison jumpsuit appeared in the local and national press, a commission was formed to investigate whether his actions violated certain canons of the Code of Judicial Conduct. The Commission and later the Supreme Court of Louisiana found that Judge Ellender's actions did indeed violate certain codes of conduct, and they ordered that he be suspended from the bench without pay for one year. In addition, he was ordered to take a course at one of the local universities that would "allow him to gain insight into the attitude of other racial groups, particularly groups where interrelations are marked by antagonism, discrimination and conflict" (*In re Ellender*).

The third case, *Locurto v. Guiliani* was decided in April 2006, and involves one New York City Police officer (Joseph Locurto) and two New York City Firemen (Jonathan Walters and Robert Steiner) who created a float for the Broad Channel Labor Day parade: Broad Channel is a small, predominantly white island community in southeast Queens. The

float was called “Black to the Future: Broad Channel 2098,” and depicted what the island community would look like if it were integrated in the future. All three men donned blackface, black afro wigs, and overalls with no t-shirts, or cut-off jeans and old-looking t-shirts. As court documents reveal, “The float itself featured two buckets of Kentucky Fried Chicken on the hood of the flatbed truck. One of the participants ate a watermelon and . . . yelled at the crowd, ‘Crackers, we’re moving in’” (*Locurto v. Guiliani*). After the *New York Times* and other local and national media sources ran articles about the parade, the NYPD and FDNY created commissions to investigate their actions. Both commissions found that Locurto, Walters, and Steiner acted in a manner unbecoming to their positions and ordered their dismissals. Locurto and friends then filed a lawsuit against Mayor Rudolph Guiliani and other officials, claiming that their First Amendment rights had been violated. The plaintiffs won in the district court, and the city was ordered to reinstate them, but the Second Circuit Court of Appeals finally ruled against the plaintiffs, arguing that their dismissals were legal and appropriate.⁴

While it may seem as if I have taken us far from the debate about blackface performances of *Othello*, I am interested in these recent legal findings because they offer a fascinating discussion about the tension between intention, practice, and reception. All three cases include lengthy discussions of the public officials’ intentions for donning blackface. In *Berger v. Battaglia*, Bobby Berger argued that he was merely interested in entertaining people with “music . . . he had been interested in since childhood, when his family and neighbors gathered together at this parents’ house for weekly sing-alongs” (*Berger v. Battaglia*). In *In re Ellender*, the court papers state that Judge Ellender’s “intent [was] to be humorous by implying that Mrs. Ellender, who was newly married to him and who was reportedly young and attractive, had her husband under her control” (*In re Ellender*). And in *Locurto v. Guiliani*, the plaintiffs argued not only that they wanted to be funny, but also that they “intended to promote an integrationist message” (*Locurto v. Guiliani*). And yet, in two of the three cases the judges dismissed the relevance of the public officials’ intentions. In *In re Ellender*, for example, the Supreme Court of Louisiana ruled that:

We agree with the mitigating evidence presented that Judge Ellender did not intend to offer an affront to the African-American community. Nonetheless, his behavior exhibits his failure to appreciate the effects of his actions on the community as a whole. (*In re Ellender*)

Thus, the Court acknowledges and even accepts Judge Ellender's statement of intent, but it weighs the communal reception of his actions more heavily, specifically citing the negative media attention his actions garnered. Likewise, in *Locurto v. Guiliani*, the Second Circuit Court of Appeals finds:

Whatever the plaintiffs' [Locurto, Walters, and Steiner] intentions, the message their actions conveyed was, from the vantage of our nation's history, sadly unoriginal. . . . We . . . find that the defendants' [the NYPD and FDNY] interest in maintaining a relationship of trust between the police and fire departments and the communities they serve outweighed the plaintiffs' expressive interests in this case. (*Locurto v. Guiliani*)

Like the judges in *In re Ellender*, this court finds that the negative media attention "generated" by the public officials' actions was an important factor in the court's ability to assess the effect on the community (*Locurto v. Guiliani*). And this effect on the community, one might call it the community's reception of these actions, outweighs the plaintiffs' First Amendment claims. Furthermore, Bobby Berger seems to have fared better legally precisely because there was not the immediate and widespread media focus on his blackface routines. After all, he did perform in blackface for close to ten years before anyone complained. To put it another way: his intentions could be weighed more heavily precisely because a negative community reaction was not immediate *and* perceptible through media coverage.

While debates about the balancing mechanism used to weigh the plaintiffs' First Amendment rights against their ability to perform their public-service positions efficiently is a fascinating area of legal debate, I am more interested in the way this balancing mechanism privileges discussions of reception over intention.⁵ It seems that First Amendment legal theorists widely agree that the theory upholding the right to free speech and artistic expression is one that is governed by "audience-oriented" ideas. In the 1973 landmark case *Miller v. California*, the Supreme Court established a three-pronged system for determining whether a particular speech act is NOT protected by the First Amendment, and the system heavily privileges audience reception. Two of the prongs of *Miller*, for example, require the court to determine whether the "average person, applying contemporary community standards would find that work, taken as a whole, appeals to prurient interest" and "whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value" (*Miller v. California*). The emphasis in this approach on the "average person"

and “community standards” focuses the law in reception theory, or, as legal theorists have termed it, audience-oriented theory. In addition, the Supreme Court has employed a “marketplace of ideas” theory, arguing that “it is the purpose of the First Amendment to preserve an uninhibited marketplace of ideas in which the truth will ultimately prevail” (*Red Lion Broadcasting Company v. FCC*). This theory emphasizes that the communicative nature of speech must be “effective” with regards to the audience, otherwise the audience will not buy it in both literal terms and philosophical ones.

Again these cases, and the legal theories that underpin them, specifically do not support intentionality. As Anne Salzman Kurzweg, writing in the *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review*, asks, “Should an art piece be ‘saved’ from censorship or an artist escape an obscenity conviction because of what the speaker intended to accomplish via his creative act?” (Kurzweg). The answer, according to the present audience-oriented interpretation of the First Amendment, is a resounding no, and this is supported by the second set of cases that I will briefly discuss. These cases examine the legality of regulating public funding for controversial pieces of art. As I reported earlier, the Wooster Group’s funding was cut by 43 percent by the New York State Council of the Arts after they produced *Route 1 & 9*. Although the Wooster Group did not pursue a legal means to restore their public funding, a similar case came to court in 1992 and was finally resolved by the Supreme Court in 1998 (*National Endowment for the Arts v. Finley*). When Congress eliminated money from the NEA’s budget after the controversy involving the Mapplethorpe and Serrano exhibits, they adopted the Williams/Coleman Amendment, a bipartisan compromise, that dictated that the Chairperson of the NEA, in establishing procedures to judge the artistic merit of grant applicants, shall “take into consideration general standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs and values of the American public” (Williams/Coleman Amendment). Despite the fact that artists like Karen Finley sued the NEA on the basis of discrimination, the Supreme Court ruled that the amendment was legal. The ruling in effect solidified the audience-oriented interpretation of the First Amendment. Unlike Judith Butler’s fascinating examination of “linguistic vulnerability,” here I am not addressing the untenable nature of censorship (Butler 38). Rather, I am challenging the notion, supported by “speaker-oriented” theorists, that a critical investigation of intention in performance is more semiotically relevant than a critical investigation of reception (the audience-oriented model).

Returning to Shakespeare or Leaving Him?

By challenging the focus on intentionality when theorizing the semiotic import of blackface, I do not mean to present a stable, predictable, or even static view of reception. Unlike legal theorists like Anne Salzman Kurzweg, Lawrence Solum, and Eliot Krieger, who advocate for a speaker-oriented interpretation of the First Amendment because it might avoid the “undesirable majoritarian results” of an audience-oriented one, I do not believe that reception is static when it is “collectivist” (Kurzweg). Intention, practice, and reception cannot be disentangled: they inform and challenge each other, as I hope the examples I have provided throughout this essay demonstrate. I also do not want to suggest that determining reception is a simplistic matter because it is universal: there are, of course, ranges of reception. That is precisely why the three legal cases involving public officials in blackface rely on media coverage to determine “the effects of [their] actions on the community as a whole” (*In re Ellender*). Likewise, reception is not static because it can also change over time. The initial critical reception of *Bamboozled*, for example, was horrendous. The film was panned in print, and it did not fare well at the box office. Since the special edition of the DVD was released, however, the critical reception has changed considerably: it is now regarded as an important text and is often included on syllabi. The film’s release on DVD enabled a different kind of viewing, one that was frame-by-frame repeatable, rewindable, and skippable: in other words, audience controlled. Where critics panned the film initially for being “contradictory” and “confused,” they now engage in asking, “To what degree do viewers participate in the very processes they are positioned by the film to criticize” (Lucia 11). And, “Could it be the case that our oppositional gaze and attendant practices depend upon the effigy’s characteristic talent for absorbing blame, and thus, that they perpetuate our dependence upon scapegoating and its attendant cruelties?” (Nyong’o 374). As these questions demonstrate, the discussion has moved slightly away from a discussion of intention to an attempt to untangle the processes and meanings of reception. The collectivity of reception is neither static nor fictional. Rather, it is fluid and quite palpable through media coverage, published reviews, blogs, message boards, etc.⁶

Because of the flexibility and mutability of reception, appropriations of stereotypes and negative images are potentially possible. By *appropriation* I mean the attempt to control and alter the meaning of disempowering rhetoric (e.g., nigger, bitch, queer, etc.) by those who did not initially contribute to the dominant society’s rhetoric (e.g., people of color, women,

homosexuals, etc.). As Judith Butler argues, one can appropriate images, labels, and even entire discourses, but there is no way to cleanse “language [or performance] of its traumatic residue, and no way to work through trauma *except* through the arduous effort it takes to direct the course of its repetition” (Butler 38; emphasis mine). Taking charge of the repetition of a painful discourse and/or performance, one may be able to appropriate and instrumentalize it. This certainly occurred for the Wooster Group when they performed Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones* in blackface to much acclaim in both 1998 and 2006. Despite the fact that the group was widely criticized for its use of blackface in *Route 1 & 9* in 1981, critics hailed *The Emperor Jones* for highlighting “the performative nature of race” (Harries). Kate Valk, the white actress who performed in blackface, “makes it clear that Brutus Jones is a white man’s idea of a Negro” (Als). The audience remains “at all times powerfully aware that we are witnessing an actress fashioning, with superb precision, a simulacrum of a stereotype” (Isherwood). These positive reviews demonstrate that the Wooster Group was able to appropriate and make politically and artistically active this old racist performance trope: they successfully instrumentalized the use of blackface in the reviewers’ eyes.

Although it is difficult to pinpoint any one reason for the different receptions of *Route 1 & 9* and *The Emperor Jones*, it seems clear that both the timing and the material affected reception: a blackfaced performance of *The Emperor Jones* in the 2006 post-*Bamboozled* world enabled the appropriation of blackface more readily than did *Route 1 & 9* in the Reagan era. In other words, the combination of the historical, cultural, and political worlds along with the text itself necessarily affects the reception of blackface performances. It is interesting to note that while the reviewers quoted above take into account the audience’s awareness of the performative nature of race, they implicitly privilege the “*relationality* of image and beholder,” to borrow W. J. T. Mitchell’s phrase (49). This *relationality*, of course, does not occur in historical, cultural, and/or political vacuums; rather, the “*relationality* of image and beholder” is informed by these various factors.

Does this type of understanding of the mechanisms behind reception, then, not open the door for an instrumentalized blackface performance of *Othello*? If this type of analysis—one that encompasses performance and legal approaches to, and theories of, blackface—complicates a simplistic understanding of the relationship between practice, intention, and reception, and if attention to the “*relationality* of image and beholder” challenges the notion that intentionality creates meaning, then perhaps

a blackfaced performance of *Othello* is not only viable, but also desirable. And yet, one must acknowledge that Shakespeare is *the author*. While Mitchell brilliantly discusses the difficulty of controlling the meaning of certain images—they have their own “lives,” as he says—with Shakespeare the difficulty is in controlling the meaning of his authorship.⁷ Despite the fact that the recent history of blackface performances demonstrates how complex the relationships between intention, practice, and reception are when there is an attempted appropriation of blackface, these recent productions did not have to deal with the strange power of Shakespeare’s authorship *and* the myth of Shakespeare’s intentions. As many scholars have noted, Shakespeare is one of the few authors who is assumed to have written timeless and universal plays. The construction of Shakespeare—a man who wrote plays in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for white men who performed in blackface and cross dressed—as the universal Bard—the poet who speaks for all ages—exemplifies a cultural desire for historical unity, cohesion, and organization. This, of course, is just simply a fantasy. Thus, in the case of blackface performances of *Othello*, it is important to acknowledge the power of the “Shakespeare Factor.” Unlike other great playwrights, whose plays continue to be produced and enjoyed, Shakespeare alone has been described as the father of all humanity: a cultural construction that challenges almost all critical approaches to his work.⁸

The issue, then, becomes how one can assess the relationships between intention, practice, and reception when they come to blackface *and* Shakespeare. As I demonstrated at the beginning of this essay, the scholars and practitioners who have called for modern blackfaced performances of Shakespeare have reached their practical positions through radically different theoretical stances. Nonetheless, many frame their arguments in terms of a return to early modern *original practices*, and the dual meaning of “original” is apt for their calls. They want blackface to be original in the sense that it is accurate to Shakespeare’s practices *and* intentions: as Quarshie says, *Othello* was “a role written for a white actor” (Quarshie 5); and as Bland says, a “blackfaced *Othello*” was “Shakespeare’s original intent” (Bland 31). But they also want blackface to be original in the sense that it is wholly new, a twenty-first-century creation that helps the audience understand the constructed nature of blackness: as Vaughan says, the text “call[s] attention to the Moor as an impersonation” (Vaughan 94); and as Richmond says, this impersonation of blackness “display[s] the tragic fact that racism may distort it’s victims’ own behavior” (Richmond 96) In other words, they hope the original practice (in the sense that it is

both true to the seventeenth century *and* wholly new) will help create an activated and oppositional gaze. But what semiotic work is Shakespeare doing in this formulation? Why Shakespeare? It is jolting to read Spike Lee state, "Of course, no one uses blackface any more" (9), because it is Shakespeareans who hope that the practice can be revived through the Bard: the ultimate undead dead in literary and cultural figures.⁹ It is no wonder, then, that one of the actors who auditions to star in "Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show" in *Bamboozled* recites lines from Shakespeare! In fact, Kim Hall's new critical edition of *Othello* includes an entire section on minstrelsy in which she reminds her reader that "T.D. Rice first 'jumped Jim Crow' in New York after an Edwin Booth/Thomas Hamblin *Othello*" (Hall 356).

Interestingly, the critics who have attempted to place the most pressure on the semiotics of race in Shakespearean performance often end their investigations with the equivocal statement that their interests might just be leaving Shakespeare behind. Celia Daileader, for example, speculating about whiteface and blackface performance potentials in *Antony and Cleopatra*, muses:

What if an actress of color—like Whoopi Goldberg in her appearance at the Oscars—were to 'whiten up' for the Liz Taylor look and play the beat-the-messenger scenes with allusion to Vivien Leigh's Scarlett O'Hara? A white actor in blackface as the messenger could invoke Hattie McDaniel's eye-rolling Mammy. . . . Then again, that would have little to do with . . . Shakespeare's play. (Daileader 218)

Likewise, Sujata Iyengar wonders if the significance of cross-racial casting in single-sex productions amounts to a racial bedtrick. She concludes, "we see something that diverts us (in all its senses) because it is an unexpected link in a chain of anticipated substitutions, but that does not question those expectations themselves, or why we have them. For that, we might have to leave Shakespeare behind" (65). While these speculations end on slightly ambivalent tones—it is unclear how willing Daileader and/or Iyengar are to depart from Shakespeare—I rather agree with Hugh Quarshie's final assessment. After fantasizing about a production of *Othello* that would emphasize the "political and military context" of early modern Venice, the "ruthless pre-Christian culture" of the Venetians, and the "manner and extent of Othello's reaction to betrayal," Quarshie quips, "But, you may say, that's another Othello, not Shakespeare's. That's rather the point, isn't it?" (23). Dealing with the fraught reception of blackface minstrelsy in contemporary American society, we might do well to leave

Shakespeare behind. By saying this, I am not suggesting that anyone should give up teaching, writing, or producing Shakespeare's plays: I, for one, certainly do not plan to do anything of the sort. Instead, I am arguing that we will have to dispense with the cultural force of Bardolatry before we can advance creating and enabling an oppositional gaze for blackface performances. The appropriation of blackface might occur, but it will not occur through Shakespeare because the enduring legacy of Bardolatry enables the conflation of intention with production and the erasure of reception ranges. Shakespeare (the man, the plays, and the performances) is too strong a force in the cultural imagination to be discussed *without* a type of fictive intention. When it comes to Shakespeare, reception is always written out of production because it is implicitly positively written into it. The force of Shakespeare's cultural capital is too strong to forego the fantasy of the Bard's intentions as race neutral or even race progressive. Moreover, an uncomplicated promotion of this fantasy will not enable the appropriative moves that many scholars and practitioners demand. For that we will have to leave Shakespeare behind.

Notes

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¹Eric Lott and Ian Smith, writing about two different historical moments, both discuss the popularity of blackface performances as stemming from the collapse of vastly different viewing strategies: the mimetic belief, desire, and assumption of the reality of performance and the knowledge that the performance (enabled through the use of specific prosthetics) is unreal.

²Of course, I borrow this phrase and notion from bell hooks (115–132).

³Of course, I borrow this phrase and notion from W. J. T. Mitchell.

⁴Although I have not been able to find documentation that Locurto et al. are pursuing this case further, it seems logical to assume that they will attempt to have the case retried before the Supreme Court.

⁵The Pickering "Balancing Test" was established with *Pickering v. Board of Education*, which involved the First Amendment claims of a public school teacher who was dismissed by the Board of Education of Will County, Illinois, after a letter she wrote criticizing the Board's funding choices and purported lack of transparency was published in a local newspaper. The court held that the scope of the public employee's First Amendment rights must be determined by balancing "the interests of the [employee], as a citizen, in commenting upon matters of public concern and the interest of the State, as an employer, in promoting the efficiency of the public services it performs through its employees."

⁶There is fascinating new work about how to gauge reception through internet websites that include message boards. See C. Smith.

⁷The subtitle to Mitchell's book *What Do Pictures Want?* is *The Lives and Loves of Images*.

⁸Harold Bloom, for example, is explicit in his desire to silence critical approaches; instead, he advocates for aesthetic approaches only.

⁹When I encountered Seth Grahame-Smith's rewritings of classical books with zombies, I was shocked that a Shakespeare text was not his first choice: *Twelfth Night of the Living Dead* comes instantly to my mind!

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