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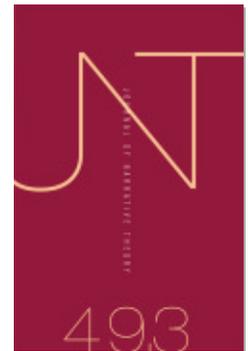
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Michael Lutz

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Poisoned Sight: Race and the Material Phantasm in *Othello*

Michael Lutz

In 1992, a trial jury was presented with a video recording of Los Angeles police officers severely beating black motorist Rodney King. Though King remained prone and unresisting during the assault, as the footage appeared to categorically demonstrate, the officers were acquitted when the video was shown by the defense, who argued it was the police officers, and not King, who were vulnerable. Writing in the aftermath of the rebellions that followed the acquittal of the officers, Judith Butler turns her attention back to the video, wondering what “pervades white perception” in such a way as to render, in the documentation of his own beating, King as “the agent of violence, one whose agency is phantasmatically implied as the narrative precedent and antecedent to the frames that are shown” (16). Building on the work of Frantz Fanon to deem this racialized formation of the visual field “white paranoia,” Butler explains that in the visual episteme of whiteness, when the white viewer is threatened by proximity to a black body, “violence” is understood to be “the imminent action of the black male body” (18). White paranoia, in the end, “projects the intention to injure that it itself enacts” (22).

In 2014, during his grand jury testimony regarding his killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, twenty-eight-year-old Officer Darren Wilson repeated this visual logic in his likening of the eighteen-year-old Brown—who was Wilson’s equal in height and only eighty pounds heavier—to professional wrestler Hulk Hogan (*State of Missouri v. Darren*

Wilson 212). When Wilson threatened to shoot Brown—in Wilson’s account, Brown accosted the officer while he sat in his police vehicle—Wilson says Brown attempted to grab Wilson’s gun from his holster: “And then after he did that, he looked up at me and had the most intense aggressive face. The only way I can describe it, it looks like a demon, that’s how angry he looked” (225). While Brown’s death incited protests and unrest in Ferguson and across the country, the jury’s decision not to charge Wilson apparently validated his argument that the unarmed teenager he shot six times (and at whom he fired at least six more times) posed a danger to him that could be described, in his own terms, as demonic. As Steve Martinot and Jared Sexton write of the recurrence of police violence against black and brown bodies, “Owing to the instability of white supremacy, the social structures of whiteness must ever be re-secured in an obsessive fashion. The process of re-inventing whiteness and white supremacy has always involved the state, and the state has always involved the utmost paranoia” (64). White paranoia, in other words, is integral to institutional white supremacy, providing a way of seeing the black body as attended by its own phantasmatic, volatile, and violent agency, and preemptively justifying the white subject’s responses of fear, aversion, and murder.

To move from these narratives to William Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Othello* (1604) might seem questionable, a flight from our urgent social and political reality to the comfortable annals of centuries-old fiction. And if white paranoia is foundational to the white field of vision, finding it in some form in Shakespeare’s play is no surprise, poised as the text is in the early stages of England’s colonial programs and the transatlantic slave trade that sparked Europe’s invention of the modern racist paradigm. But what is important about *Othello*, this essay argues, is the dramatic mechanism through which it has historically trained its audiences in the logic of white paranoia—blackface performance. I take my cue from an admittedly dubious source, American Confederate sympathizer and Shakespeare enthusiast Mary Preston’s 1869 essay on *Othello*, where she takes the time to explain for her reader that “[i]n studying the play of *Othello*, I have always *imagined* its hero a *white* man” (216). She acknowledges that “the dramatist paints him black,” but in her view this merely “is a stage decoration,” so she feels safe in “dispens[ing] with it” (216). Shakespeare was misguided, she insists, and would not have made a tragic hero black if he had ever met a person of color. Othello’s “daub of black” becomes, for

Preston, Shakespeare's error, "one of the few erroneous strokes of the great master's brush, the *single* blemish on a faultless work," and she emphatically concludes: "Othello was a *white* man!" (216).

Notorious for its frank racism, Preston's account has appeared occasionally in *Othello* scholarship, providing a title for Dymphna Callaghan's book on the impersonation of all racialized and gendered others by white men on the early modern stage and excoriated by M.R. Ridley in the introduction to his Arden edition of the play.¹ Preston's essay demonstrates a troubled relationship with *Othello*: Shakespeare's representation of blackness is too much for her, something she cannot abide, and in order to uphold the play as a masterpiece she must "imagine" it away. The very notion of a heroic black man in the Shakespearean canon is threatening to Preston, and she rehearses the longstanding critical aversion to the spectrality of implied or imagined interracial coupling that Michael Neill has traced in *Othello*'s reception history (383–412). In other words, Preston enacts her own white paranoia, avoiding the entirety of the play's racial content by discounting it as incidental "stage decoration." It is perhaps no coincidence that she makes her claim some forty years after Ira Aldridge became the first black man to perform the part of Othello. Preston disparages the choice to have a black protagonist to begin with, but also suggests that any black actor who takes on the role is, in a sense, being inauthentic to Shakespeare's supposed intention of a merely ornamental blackness.

Preston's reaction evokes the practices of blackface performance ("the dramatist paints him black") while also aligning such material considerations with aesthetic blunder (a "stage decoration" and "one of the few erroneous strokes of the great master's brush"). This problem is best addressed not by inviting black actors to take on the role, but by simply turning Othello white. Writing during Reconstruction, just three years after the Fourteenth Amendment defined United States citizenship to include freed slaves, Preston works to conflate the bodies of real, racialized Others with the dehumanized, objectified matter of theatrical props, implying their subordination to whatever she presumes to be the 'human' aspects of the Othello character. This essay will venture back even further, though, to show how such a strategic configuration of persons and things originates in Shakespeare's dramatic moment—indeed, to show how the text itself, in its conflation of the human body and the dramatic technology of blackface, teaches its audience to think racially through theatrical con-

vention. How does performative artifice come to stand for the properties of ‘real’ bodies, and how does this process contribute to the humanization of some and the dehumanization of others?

Tracking the symbolic registers of blackness across the sixteenth century (through medieval mystery plays, humanist allegorical drama, early modern science, and colonial travel writing), I argue that these shifts document the birth of a mode of white spectatorship and an attendant mode of white paranoia on the early modern English commercial stage. Poised between what Sujata Iyengar calls the “residual mythology of color and the emergent myth of race” (8), the performance of a black character by a non-black actor through cosmetics literally embodies the contradictions of a dawning epistemology that binds skin color to moral or intellectual capacity and overall human worth. Thus, where Preston must imagine away Othello’s blackness, Shakespeare’s audience would have had to imagine it into being, in that they would have to somehow connect what they saw feigned on the stage to extra-theatrical discourses on bodies and color difference.

Othello in this sense is a case study for contemplating the historical construction and stabilization of race—not just ‘black’ or ‘white’ but race as a mediatory apparatus, as described by W.J.T. Mitchell:

race is not merely a content to be mediated, an object to be represented visually or verbally, or a thing to be depicted in a likeness or image, but [. . .] race is itself a medium and an iconic form—not simply something to be seen, but itself a framework for seeing through or (as Wittgenstein would put it) seeing *as*. (13)

Concordantly, as Hari Ziyad writes, “race is part and parcel of whiteness, necessitating and sustained by the existence of people who experience the world as white” (143). In other words, blackness is not an *a priori* binary opposition to whiteness but rather a constitutive exclusion that subtends and lends stability to the concept of whiteness and hence the entire notion of race as such: “For whiteness to exist, not only must Black people be subjugated by white people but they also must not function as ‘people’ under their conceptualization in the first place” (Ziyad 144). Similarly, in early modern studies, Ian Smith has coined the term “chromatic materiality” to describe a dynamic of early modern performance wherein

“Africans figure neither principally nor solely as persons but are construed as visible to English consciousness based on the shared feature of color with specified objects,” such as, for instance, the convention of blackface makeup (“White Skin, Black Masks” 37).

In the argument that follows, the early modern theater and its blackface conventions are understood as a proving ground where race as a mode of thinking and seeing is distilled from a series of discourses, ranging from religious drama, to allegories of ignorance and wisdom, to Renaissance humanist commonplaces. By sharing poetic space with or abutting theatrical practices of racial impersonation, these conventions come to bolster racialized thinking and spectatorship in early modern England. As Kim F. Hall has shown, in early modernity the poetic and rhetorical binary of black and white, while used to describe a variety of subjects, including diverse people and characters, nevertheless carried with it the latent logic of racialization (6–7). Thus, in looking outside explicitly racialized performance, we can complicate the notion that *Othello* refers transparently to an exterior world where groups like ‘black’ Moors and ‘white’ Europeans objectively exist, instead allowing us to see how such a ‘reality’ is constructed for and by the audience.

Using D. Fox Harrell’s work at the intersections of media theory, cognitive science, and literary study, I first outline a method of understanding how *Othello* prompts audience cognition in ways that highlight the slipperiness of racial thinking and seeing, especially in a situation where a ‘real’ racial Other is not present onstage at all but is instead figured by the presence of an actor’s painted body. I then contextualize the history of blackface performance in the allegorical religious mode of the mystery plays, where a blackened face marks the sin of fallen angels. I continue by tracing the development of this allegorical function in humanist rhetoric, where a darkened face comes to signify ignorance and folly. This background is crucial for understanding how the commercial theater eventually gives rise both to a mode of white spectatorship and to what I call the ‘material phantasm’ of early modern dramatic blackness. The process is akin to Karen Barad’s theory of “intra-action,” which, as opposed to *interaction*, describes how “distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through” conflation and “entanglement” of entities, at which point they are “only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement” (33). Whiteness and blackness, race and identity, humanity and nonhumanity all become

thinkable through the entanglement of bodies, cognitive and social conventions, and the material props of stage performance.

Blackface performance in particular lies at a juncture of the cognitive and the material: as in the racist traditions of minstrel shows or vaudeville, it cues the audience to imagine the performer as something while knowing they are not, in fact, the 'real thing.' It may be described as what Edwin Hutchins calls a "material anchor," his term for "the stabilizing role of [a] material structure" in human thought, such as a compass that reminds a traveler which direction is north (1555). Similarly, the actor's makeup in a blackface performance might be said to function as a proxy for the audience, indicating 'blackness' as an attribute of real persons outside the spectacle at hand and hence helping the audience 'stabilize' their imagining of the performer's character as black. D. Fox Harrell incorporates Hutchins's work on the material distribution of cognition into his own theory of "phantasmal media" while providing a point of complication. Poised between both theories of cognitive science and media studies, Harrell proposes the idea of the phantasm, which is his term for "*a combination of imagery (mental or sensory) and ideas*" (4). Building from Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner's conceptual blending theory,² Harrell argues that interaction with works of art elicits immediate thoughts and sensations, which he calls "images," and they are cognitively yoked to "ideas." "Idea" is an umbrella term that encapsulates various assumptions, associations, and preconceptions that have their basis in the personal and cultural history (what Harrell calls a "worldview") of the individual experiencing the artwork. Thus, a phantasm is a bit of sensory imagery imbued with "semivisible" or "connotative meaning" that, in the moment of experience, often seems "natural and uncontroversial" (6).

Refining his claim that phantasms are produced by a combination of imagery and ideas, Harrell further argues that imagery may also be understood as "image space," while ideas may be considered "epistemic space" (35). As before, the first term encompasses the sensual imagery evoked by a specific object or situation, while the second indicates the associated knowledge claims about it that derive from a pre-existing "worldview." Image spaces, for Harrell, expand Hutchins's concept of the material anchor in that "the material structures of external objects perceived in the world can be inherited by the structures of mental or verbal images" (42). In other words, while Hutchins suggests material anchors are simply im-

bued with representational significance projected by the act of cognition, Harrell argues that material anchors can act in turn upon the cognitive process, opening a wider “space” of associated imagery rather than a single representational program. Harrell summarizes his point thus: “image spaces allow us to consider how the forms of images trigger further imaginative processes” (40).³

Following Harrell, I call the performative effects of blackface in early modern drama ‘material phantasms’ to emphasize the collusion between the onstage device (blackface performance) and the various epistemic spaces in which it may participate. Centralizing Hutchins’s idea of the material anchor and Harrell’s formulation of the phantasm admits the wide range of imaginative work an object may elicit in performance with a human actor. It also foregrounds the relationship between the actor and the object more strongly than the term “performing object,” which is often used to describe puppets or masks (Proschan 4; Bell 14–15). Indeed, despite its similar status as a dramatic prop, blackface is far more amorphous than a mask, much less legible as an ‘object’ that is distinct from the face of the actor who wears it (Jones 121; Smith, “Othello’s Black Handkerchief” 23–24). Neither the actor’s bare body nor the paint without a face can accomplish the performance: the two must work in concert. The impersonation of a black body, then, is the result of a nonblack actor donning makeup in conjunction with audience perception cued to read that makeup in a certain register. As the actor and makeup become enmeshed in the eye of the viewer, they also become enmeshed with the viewer’s epistemic space of actual black bodies *and* the image space of other blackface performances.

By focusing on *Othello*, we can see how Shakespeare’s play both helps and hinders the audience’s conflation of the actor’s body with cosmetic artifice in the production of the spectacular experience of a “Moor” who seems (or in some instances does not seem) ‘real.’ One crux of Shakespeare’s play, in other words, is the negotiation and synthesis of disparate discourses and dramatic conventions that result in what W.B. Worthen calls the “effect of representation,” the sense that dramatic performance mediates, reproduces, or refers to a verisimilar “reality” (96). By simultaneously emphasizing the nonblack actor’s cosmetically blackened face and insisting on Othello’s characteristics, behaviors, and attitudes as somehow bound up in an extradiegetic notion of “Moorishness,” *Othello* begs the

spectator to accept race as a natural and immanent material property of bodies while paradoxically allowing that racialized bodies are anything but immanent. *Othello* stages a nebulous and phantasmatic danger that cannot be directly evidenced, only imagined—a precursor of white paranoia. For Mary Preston, Othello's blackness was a foregone conclusion, one that had to be imagined away if she wanted to enjoy the play at all. But the play also suggests quite the opposite problem for its moment of composition: Shakespeare's language continually draws attention to the artificial or fictive character of Othello's blackness, actively involving the audience's cognition to imagine it into theatrical being.

Brabantio's Dream

Othello opens with a scene that pointedly raises the question of how imagination relates to reality, or rather, how imagination might inform or construct the reality one inhabits. The villain Iago and his dupe/accomplice Roderigo wake Brabantio, the father of Othello's new wife Desdemona, to inform him of the couple's elopement. For the first few exchanges, Brabantio is confused and angry at being awakened. It is not until Iago mentions "the Moor" (1.1.124) that his tenor changes to panic:

Strike on the tinder, ho!
Give me a taper, call up all my people.
This accident is not unlike my dream,
Belief of it oppresses me already.
Light, I say, light! (1.1.138–42)

And what did Brabantio dream? Did he dream only of Desdemona running away, or specifically of her relationship with Othello? If Brabantio was the one who initially "loved [Othello], oft invited [him]" (1.3.129) into the home, as he will later admit, we might speculate Brabantio somehow anticipated this "accident" for which he provided grounds without being fully conscious of it.

Similarly, Harrell claims that phantasms are "made real by the imagination," like "self-fulfilling prophecies," and that there is "an important, underexamined relationship between [. . .] experiential realities and the basic human processes of imaginative cognition" (6). Because Brabantio

has dreamed (and apparently dreaded) the union of Othello and Desdemona, their elopement is charged with uncanny, fateful significance. Furthermore, Harrell is concerned with how art can produce or modify phantasms that can in turn act upon the imaginative worldview and hence the worldly ‘reality’ of an audience. It is also the power of art, Harrell says, to “ground concepts and images in multiple worldviews” and thus “reveal” a phantasm in its partiality and particularity (6). With Harrell’s points in mind, Brabantio’s dream—the nebulous and unnamed imaginary thing that so suddenly becomes real in *Othello*’s opening scene—repays closer attention, particularly in terms of Iago’s ability to ‘stage’ it.

Crucially, the opening of Shakespeare’s play introduces not simply the plot of the drama but the character of Othello himself. The first lines are Roderigo doubting Iago’s intentions in rousing Brabantio, to which Iago insists that he has been overlooked for a promotion in favor of “Michael Cassio, a Florentine” (1.1.19). Iago berates Cassio’s book knowledge compared with his own field experience before announcing, exasperated, that he is only “his Moorship’s ancient” for the time being (1.1.32). This is, apart from the play’s title, the audience’s first introduction to Othello. Iago again voices his displeasure at the lost promotion in order to establish that he does not “love the Moor” (1.1.39). His remarks foreground his conflict with Othello, highlighting the latter’s status as an accomplished military personage, and only belatedly specify that Othello is a “Moor,” a term with a considerable number of valences in early modern England. “Moor” connoted not simply differences in skin color but also the history of Moorish Islam in the Iberian Peninsula, which thus begged for an association with the Muslim Turkish Empire (Barthelemy 1–17; Vitkus 77–106; Dadabhoy 121–47). The idea of a Moor thus charts and connects several axes of difference—somatic, religious, and geographical—and throughout this opening scene, Shakespeare uses the exchanges between Roderigo, Iago, and Brabantio to construct an idea of Othello that hovers among all of them. To clarify this point in Harrell’s terms, the experience of hearing Othello described by other characters incites in the audience a phantasm of the Moor; the play expects its auditors to draw from a multitude of discourses on Moorishness, and only as the scene progresses does Othello come more into focus.

Thus, we are introduced to Othello as Iago’s superior, with whom he has some considerable quarrel; it is only after this that we learn Othello is

a Moor, and hence, the title character. When Roderigo derides Othello as “old thicklips” (1.1.65), deploying early modern racist physiology, it is clear we are to understand Othello as physically as well as culturally Other. Othello’s color difference is also reinforced after the pair rouse Brabantio, and Iago refers to Othello obliquely as “an old black ram” that is “tupping your white ewe” (1.1.87–88), casting Othello’s complexion into relief against the whiteness of Brabantio’s daughter, a difference emphasized through the different stage makeup the actors wore (Karim-Cooper 35). Such language also taps into eroticized bestial imagery that played a part in historical racialist distinctions between Africans and Europeans (Barthelemy 5; Tokson 17; Little, *Shakespeare Jungle Fever* 306). At first none of this makes sense to Brabantio, who is disoriented. Iago redoubles his efforts: “Because we come to do you service, and you think we are ruffians, you’ll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse; you’ll have your nephews neigh to you, and you’ll have courses for cousins and jennets for germans!” (1.1.107–12).

Here Iago resumes his vulgar, bestial language with the mention of the “Barbary horse.” Rather than referring to Desdemona as an animal, however, Iago finally clarifies by referring explicitly to “your daughter,” upholding Desdemona’s humanity while denying it to Othello. During this exchange, through the combination of explicitly racial epithets and images of sexualized, bestial blackness, the audience is led to imagine that the “Moor” they have been hearing so much about is indeed a black man. Brabantio’s stakes in the situation are slightly different, however, since he already knows Othello; Iago works to establish the black and bestial before finally revealing that he is referring specifically to the Moor.

Brabantio is finally persuaded precisely because he has had some “dream” that emerges, he thinks, into terrible reality. By inviting Othello into his home, the possibility that Desdemona might fall for the Moor has crossed his mind—indeed, such an invitation stands in stark contrast to his response to Roderigo, another would-be suitor: “I have charged thee not to haunt about my doors: / [. . .] My daughter is not for thee” (1.1.95–97). But the phantasm that Roderigo and Iago now conjure—the interloping, deceitful Moor—works so well because Brabantio has already done some of the work for them, harboring doubts about Othello’s presence in his home and, as is soon revealed, a superstitious streak that is quick to asso-

ciate Othello's blackness with "charms / By which the property of youth and maidenhood / May be abused" (1.1.169–71).

Iago and Roderigo's racist fearmongering works well enough on Brabantio, who knows Othello, but what of the audience? It is true the opening especially trades in early modern racism regarding Moorish lasciviousness (Tokson 82–105), but Roderigo's boorishness and Iago's frank admission that "I am not what I am" (1.1.64) also mark them as figures whose accounts may not be trustworthy. The very next scene, when Othello finally appears onstage, puts everything into a new light. Eldred Jones writes that in this play the villains "continually invoke the clichés of accepted belief, while the hero himself with the aid of other characters sets up a different image" (87–88). Thus, rather than bestial, lascivious, and brutal, as Iago and Roderigo have suggested, Othello is in fact calm, eloquent, and diplomatic: the racist caricature from the first scene is revealed as purely imaginary in the face of Othello himself.

Or, rather, such a revelation *might* take place. There is a clear complicating factor: the Othello that Shakespeare's original audiences would have seen was not at all a black Moor who neatly disproved the stereotype, but a nonblack actor in blackface. In a study of the use of cosmetics on the early modern stage, Andrea Stephens notes that "the same materials used to paint canvases, scenery, and props were also applied to bodies—and thus we should not think of early modern theatrical paint as producing a 'naturalistic' effect or as effacing its own artificiality" (3). The revelation of Othello in the play's second scene is not as simple as displaying a 'real' Moor or even a 'realistic' Moor in the wake of what has come before. Shakespeare's play, rather than casting competing images of Moors against one another, instead exploits its audiences' imaginings of blackness against the artificial impersonation of blackness onstage.

"I Saw Othello's Visage in His Mind"

Shakespeare certainly seems to cast stereotypes of Moors against the onstage presence of Othello, but early modern blackface impersonation jeopardizes any easy claims that he intentionally produces some 'authentic' Moor to counteract the phantasmal stereotype. A helpful distinction to be made here is that between what Dympna Callaghan calls the "exhibition" of black people in early modern England, in instances when Africans were

put on display at public events or kept by elites as servants and curiosities, and the “mimesis” of such people by nonblack English people through costuming and performance (77). Callaghan claims that these types of early modern spectacle serve to commodify both blackness and Africans in modes commensurate with the incipient slave trade (90). On the one hand, blackness is objectified as a non-performative phenomenon, while on the other, as Ian Smith points out, it is reproduced as a performative grammar which may be appropriated by white actors (“White Skin, Black Masks” 37–38). As Virginia Mason Vaughan has argued, witness accounts from *Othello*’s production history suggest “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,” leading to a spectator’s “recognition that the actor underneath the blackened skin is actually white” (97–98), a recognition that Mary Preston voiced in the most vociferous way possible.

For Shakespeare’s early modern audience, the clichés that circulate around *Othello* in the first scene were understood to pertain to ‘real’ Moors, and so it seems the spectator is given not so much a mimetic representation of blackness as a rhetorical exhibition of many presumptions about it. In Harrell’s terms, the first scene of the play establishes an image space that is countered by the second scene on multiple levels: by *Othello*’s poetic speech and calm demeanor, as well as by his appearance as a nonblack man in costume. Thus, blackface in *Othello*, rather than exhibiting the smooth functioning of a “material anchor,” in fact destabilizes the audience’s perceptions. Brabantio wonders what caused Desdemona to “[r]un from her guardage to the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as thou” (1.2.71–72); discussing Shakespeare’s phrasing in this scene, Ian Smith notes that the mention of “sooty” calls attention not simply to *Othello*’s dark complexion but also the makeup used to color the actor’s skin, which was likely a mixture of charred cork and oil (“White Skin, Black Masks” 51). It is clear that the audience is expected to compare what they hear with what they actually see, yet this might result not in a critical reevaluation of the flaws in racialist thinking but in their imaginative reconciliation. While Desdemona insists she can overlook his blackness when she says she “saw *Othello*’s visage in his mind” (1.3.253), the early modern audience, by contradistinction, would have had to ignore the cosmetically

blackened visage they saw in order to bring to mind the black figure described in the first scene.

Writing on contemporary “original production” methods that advocate staging *Othello* with the lead actor in blackface, Ayanna Thompson notes that the underlying ethical claim is that not only is such staging “accurate for Shakespeare’s practices and intentions” but also “wholly new, a twenty-first century creation that helps the audience understand the constructed nature of blackness” (115). Yet as Thompson points out, this position assumes that Shakespeare’s “practices and intentions” were, if not indeed anti-racist, at the very least race-neutral, ignoring both the incipient racism of Shakespeare’s time and his play’s significant part in the history of modern racist thinking (117). In other words, we should not mistake the play’s evidence of the construction of blackness with Shakespeare’s individual awareness and critique of the process of racialization; instead, we can closely read the construction of race to note where, how, and why racist thinking emerges in the early modern period. For while the image space of *Othello*’s phantasmal, artificial blackface certainly invokes the explicitly racializing epistemic spaces discussed thus far, older traditions of blackface performance are integral to the development of early modern blackface conventions, and they animate rather than undermine the racist program.

The Material Phantasm and the Early Modern History of Blackface

Early modern blackface, when presented as a racial signifier, provides the spectator with a prompt to imagine something else—an actual black body—and thus to make a conscious or unconscious substitution to uphold the dramatic fiction. With that in mind, it is important to consider that early modern blackface performance has a history aside from strict racial impersonation. Jones has shown that prior to the rise of the commercial theater, blackface makeup was used in festive folk drama such as Morris dancing, mummers’ plays, St. George pageants, and the mystery plays where the “devils [. . .] were also usually portrayed as black” to allegorically signify their sinful natures (7–28). Vaughan notes that the Draper’s Company at Coventry, in putting on the Doomsday pageant for nearly two decades, paid the actors playing “‘damnpnyd Sowles’” extra for the trouble of “‘blacckyng [. . .] the Sowles facys’” (22). The Wakefield Mystery

Plays dramatize the fall of Lucifer and the rebel “angels so fare” who become “black as any coyll [coal] / And ugly, tatyred [tattered, shaggy] as a foyll [foal]” (*The Creation and Fall of the Angels* 134–37). In addition to the blackened face, a change of costume occurs that turns the angels into “tattered foals,” anticipating Iago’s mention of a “Barbary horse.” Similar blackenings seem to occur in the Chester cycle, where a pair of fallen angels are “2 feendes blacke [two fiends black]” (*The Fall of Lucifer* 230), and the Coventry cycle, where a transformed Lucifer observes: “I am a devyl ful derke [devil full dark] / Þhat was An Aungell bryht [That was an angel bright]” (*Ludus Coventriae* 77–78).

In these instances, painting the face black signals an ontological and moral shift in the characters it afflicts. Such performances are echoed and racialized when Iago informs Brabantio that “the devil will make a grand-sire of you” (1.1.90) and even more pointedly when the murdered Desdemona is called an “angel” while her killer and husband is “the blacker devil” (5.2.128–29). The difference, of course, is that for the devils and the damned, blackness is not an inherent condition but a result of their actions with respect to God’s will. The Moor, by contrast, is indelibly black—Othello is black and a “devil” in the first scene, a trope redeployed when Darren Wilson claims to have seen young Mike Brown as a “demon.” And yet despite the supposed indelibility of racialized blackness, early modernity’s emergent white paranoia was also rife with fantasies of changeable blackness, often in service of a myth of white priority. Paralleling the purity and sin of the mystery plays, such tropes present whiteness as a natural state, with blackness as a cosmetic aberration or consequence of some calamity (Little, “Re-Historicizing Race” 93; Smith, *Race and Rhetoric* 94).

The binaristic allegories of black and white were not only the purview of religion but were present in early modern humanism as well. Indeed, early modern humanism developed its own semiotics of blackness, where the darkened face represented neither race nor sin, but error and ignorance. *Aesop’s Fables* in Latin were a fixture of the humanist curriculum, appearing in the mid-sixteenth century and lasting into the eighteenth (Green 166). Situated roughly in the middle of this period, English schoolmaster Charles Hoole’s double-facing English and Latin edition of the *Fables*, prepared before his death in 1667 and published posthumously in 1700, offers the following prose translation of a fable titled “Of the Black-More”:

1. ONE bought a Black-more, thinking that he had such a colour through the negligence of him that had him before.
 2. And after he had taken him into his house, he used *all kind of washing towards him*, and strove to make him clean with all kind of baths.
 3. But he could not alter his colour; but the *smart bred a disease*.
- Mor. *The fable signifieth, that, natures remain, as they were bred at the first.* (234)

The moral, that “natures remain” as they were first “bred,” understands blackness not as the result of an avoidable or remediable process, but as an inherent condition. The fable is deeply seated in the humanist corpus: Erasmus mined Aesop for *copia*, handy images and phrases to be deployed in writing and speech, and listed variant derivatives of the “Black-more” fable in his *Adages*: “Aethiopiem lavas/Aethiopiem dealbas” (I.iv.50). Erasmus says this phrase of “washing the Ethiopie” is “particularly apposite when a matter of doubtful morality is decorated by a gloss of words, or when praise is given to one who does not deserve praise, or an unteachable person is being taught” (81). Blackness is thus blended between an actual physical characteristic—of the Ethiopian or “Black-more”—and a metaphorical indicator of some flaw or failure: a spurious cause, a questionable person, or a difficult student.

The last figure, Erasmus’s “unteachable person,” found a minor dramatic life in England in the “Wit and Science” plays of the mid-to-late sixteenth century. Each of these plays is a short, allegorical interlude dramatizing the trials and travails of a young man named Wit as he seeks the hand of Lady Science in marriage. The earliest, called *The Play of Wit and Science*, was written by the humanist educator John Redford during his time as the master at St. Paul’s choir school in 1534. The play combines many tropes from other sorts of drama, adopting the generally allegorical approach of a morality play, some romantic elements of a St. George pageant, and the blackening of the face as observed in the mysteries, but all in service of a humanist fable about the path toward education (Happé 144–45; Bevington 1029). In order to win the right to marry Lady Science, Wit is charged by her father Reason to slay the monster Tediousness. While taking a break from his quest with Honest Recreation, however, the latter is replaced by Idleness. She lulls Wit to sleep in her lap and places her “marke on him” (line 432), blackening his face. Next, she calls in her son “Ignorance [sic],” who wears a fool’s motley and whose dialogue has been described by Robert Hornback as a vulgar, broken English meant to

mock a racialized non-native speaker (76–77). Indeed, in the interlude's longest comedic exchange, Idleness cannot even teach her son to correctly pronounce his own name, a failure of identity that anticipates the aim of their mischief: they exit after switching Ignorance's motley with Wit's coat so that Wit "shall soone scantlye know himsealfe" (line 568).

When Wit awakens, he encounters Science and her mother Experience, who do not recognize him—Experience says he is "Ignorance, or his likenes" (line 719), implying that in addition to his fool's motley and poor speech, Ignorance also has a blackened face. Thus Ignorance—and Wit's unwitting physical reproduction of him—provides a dramatic embodiment of Erasmus's gloss of the "unwashable Ethiopian" as an "unteachable person." In the allegorical logic of the play, however, it is only Ignorance himself who is unteachable and hence forever blackened; Wit, whose blackness is literally incidental, a dramatic development rather than an innate characteristic, sets on a journey to reclaim his identity and hence his whiteness.

The return to a whitened state is accomplished through struggle in terms of both narrative plot and stagecraft. Wit, unaware of his own transformation, twice attempts to kiss Science, who pushes him away in disgust. Science and Experience exit, and Wit is left alone and confused. However, earlier in the play, Reason gifted Wit a mirror, which he now remembers and produces. Upon looking into it, he is shocked: "This glas, I se well, hath bene kept evill" (line 803). Thinking the mirror is to blame rather than his appearance, Wit polishes the glass and looks again, only to realize that "I [am] to[o] shamefully blotted" (808). To test the mirror, he holds it up to the audience, remarking, "All fair and cleere, they, ev'rychone!" (809–10). Confirming the mirror's correct functioning by securing the whiteness of his audience, Wit is forced to conclude his "face" is now "abhominable, / As black as the devill" (815–16). Wit is then whipped by Shame and begs Reason for forgiveness. Reason orders Instruction, Study, and Diligence to "[t]ake him and trim him in new aparell" (875). After Wit is led offstage, Reason and Confidence give speeches that altogether consist of some one hundred and twenty lines, presumably to accommodate the time needed for Wit's costume change and the washing of the actor's face before he reenters to finally slay Tediousness and bring the play to its happy end.

The Play of Wit and Science proved popular enough that two later

adaptations from the 1570s are known to exist, both following the same general outline.⁴ While the mystery plays used blackface to show an incontrovertible fall from grace into sin, in these plays Wit is blackened but also, with time, washed white and redeemed. By establishing the binary between whiteness and blackness as one encoding a difference between wisdom and folly, learning and intractability, these plays contribute to a humanist semiotics of blackness that sublimates the explicitly racial nature of Aesop's fable.

And while these and the mystery plays moralize changing skin color, their thinking aligns with medieval and early modern natural science, where humoral understandings of color difference supposed that complexion was primarily a result of climate. In the humoral model drawn from Galen, skin color was thought to be the result of environmental factors—the sun's greater heat in Africa, for example, 'dried' the body, leaving a surfeit of melancholy, or black bile, resulting in the darker complexions of the continent's inhabitants relative to the Mediterranean and Europe. The implication of such thinking is that an individual hailing from one region who traveled to another would, in time, change complexion accordingly. Yet as Mary Floyd-Wilson has shown, increasing colonial and mercantile activity in the early modern period forced a collision between this received knowledge and an emergent scientific empiricism: movement between climates had no apparent effect on skin color, while parentage clearly did. The consequence of this realization was a bevy of theories that tried to explain how complexion could be ingrained by climate or circumstance and then transmitted through heredity (Floyd-Wilson 8–11). The following anecdote from George Best's *A True Discourse of the Late Voyages of Discoverie* (1578) illustrates the point:

I my selfe haue séene an Ethiopian as blacke as a cole broughte into Englande, who taking a faire Englishe woman to Wife, begatte a Sonne in all respectes as blacke as the Father was, although England were his natiue Countrey, & an English woman his Mother: whereby it séemeth this blacknesse procédeth rather of some naturall infection of that man, whiche was so strong, that neyther [th]e nature of the Clime, neyther the good complexion of the Mother

concurring, could any thing alter, and therefore we can not impute it to the nature of [th]e Clime. (sig. FIIIr)

As Floyd-Wilson writes, Best is “contributing to a genre of promotional tracts aimed at persuading the English that they would not be ineluctably altered by moving to and residing in a foreign climate” (8).⁵

On the one hand, early modern blackface staged the fear implicit in Best’s story of a white body turned black, and on the other, it rendered that fear part of a temporary and hence potentially pleasant fantasy. Namely, blackface both enacts and alleviates white paranoia with the most threatening of all black bodies, a white body ‘turned’ black. Lacking “the capacity for self-representation” within the early modern English imaginary, the black body becomes, as Miles P. Grier writes, “*comprised* of the very medium” used to represent it, a supplement to a personhood conceived as fundamentally white that is blackened only through accident or mishap (196–97). Thus, while dark skin is understood as non-performative, it is nevertheless linked to the materials by which a white body might impersonate ‘blackness.’ Furthermore, the metaphorical registers of blackness remain: somatic permanence means only that the black body has no choice in what it is, instead suffering from a senseless “natural infection” and embodying the unfortunate sign of a mistake that no one made. These are the notions that Shakespeare’s play, through highlighting the artifice of blackface, both unsettles and in the end entrenches.

“Is This the Noble Moor . . . ?”

Having dreamt of a possibility “not unlike” Desdemona and Othello eloping, Brabantio’s mind contains the seed that Iago will cultivate into a full fantasy of exotic magic and miscegenation. As Ania Loomba has written, “Iago’s machinations are effective” because he leverages ideological beliefs that “are not entirely external to us” (91). For Loomba, this is the central problem of the play, since Othello falls under Iago’s influence precisely because he is susceptible to the latter’s strategic deployment of misogynist stereotypes about women’s fidelity that, in turn, foster the Moor’s eventual subscription to racial ones (91). The resulting drama exists in a space of “ambiguity” where the audience cannot find a moral high ground: “any sympathy for Othello reinforces the misogynist sentiments

mouthed by some characters, and any sympathy for Desdemona endorses the view that Othello is a ‘gull, a dolt, a devil’” (100). Ultimately, what is curious about this formulation is the easy flow between how Iago ‘works’ on other characters in the play and how the play in turn ‘works’ on its audience. Indeed, Iago preys on the early modern audience’s imagination as much he does on Brabantio’s, using stereotypes and clichés to establish a basic idea of Moorishness. Yet when Othello does not live up to type, revealing the phantasm of the stage’s Moorish Other, the play also foregrounds the fact that it is not a Moor that is onstage, but a nonblack actor in blackface.

Othello challenges the audience by first bracketing what they have been accustomed to know as ‘Moorishness,’ asking them instead to imagine a Moor who by his own “round, unvarnished” words enacts a “mighty magic” (1.3.93) that proves his nobility, bringing the Duke of Venice to insist Othello is full of “virtue” and hence “far more fair than black” (1.3.290–91). The Duke’s praise is ambivalent, however, since it still operates on a racialist analogy linking what is “fair” to virtue and what is “vice” to blackness, metadramatically cuing the audience to recognize Othello as a performative artifact. By holding these elements in tension, Shakespeare’s play at first seems to stage the fantasy that Othello might, by the end, not be a ‘Moor’ at all—that is to say, instead of foolish or lascivious or violent, the play raises the possibility that Othello might indeed be wise and temperate and noble, shorn of the racist baggage Moorishness carries on the English stage. The play highlights the racialized impersonation of Othello, with the final effect being that when he does fall to jealousy and violence, the sting is all the greater.

The history of blackface from the mystery plays through *Wit and Science* suggests half of a fluctuating binary, a mark of sin or a mistake that is, in some way, perhaps remediable. Meanwhile, Shakespeare portrays Othello as noble despite his complexion, yet still hopelessly misled. When Desdemona’s servant and Iago’s wife Emilia realizes that Iago has tricked Othello into killing her mistress, she refers to Othello as Desdemona’s “filthy bargain,” a “gull,” a “dolt,” and “ignorant as dirt” (5.2.153, 159–60). Emilia’s jibes at the “dull Moor” (5.2.224) insult his intelligence but also recall the actor’s blackened (“filthy”) face that, like the hapless Wit, has rendered him “ignorant as dirt.” By so strongly insisting that a senseless mistake has been made, Emilia suggests that had Othello been a

bit more perceptive, he would have seen through Iago's lies, and the well-known story of *Othello* might have gone differently. But what could have achieved that?

In an infamous moment at the end of the third act, Desdemona accidentally drops a handkerchief Othello gifted her early in their courtship. When, through Iago's canny manipulations, Othello later sees that same handkerchief in the hand of his lieutenant Cassio, he becomes utterly convinced that his wife is unfaithful, and the bloody, tragic end of the play is locked into place. Therefore, it makes sense to assume that had Desdemona not dropped the handkerchief, things might have gone differently. As other scholars have pointed out, *Othello* is a play of missed opportunities and thwarted potentialities (Burke 165–203; Rosenfeld 257–79). But understanding why the handkerchief is dropped remains a point of contention, though the conditions of performance outlined in this essay suggest a possibility I would like to sketch.

The scene itself finds Othello alone onstage, still reeling from Iago's first insinuations of Desdemona's infidelity just a few lines before. Othello first vows to leave her "to fortune," i.e. simply abandon her, and suspects she may have strayed because he is "black," or not as soft-spoken as a Venetian courtier, or because he is "declined / Into the vale of years" (3.3.267–70). There are many reasons, he discovers, that Desdemona may not truly love him, and he considers her already "gone" (3.3.271). Ten lines later, however, Desdemona enters, and at the sight of her Othello's disposition immediately changes: "Look where she comes: / If she be false, O then heaven mocks itself, / I'll not believe't" (3.3.281–83). Desdemona, sensing something is wrong, asks if Othello is feeling well; he tells her of "a pain about [his] forehead" (3.3.288). Desdemona approaches, offering to "bind it hard" with her handkerchief, but Othello interjects: "Your napkin is too little" (3.3.290–91). "Let it alone," he says, before following her offstage (3.3.292). There is no stage direction for who drops the handkerchief or why, but it must fall here; the servant Emilia picks it up after the couple exits, and their fates are sealed.

But why is the handkerchief dropped, and if it is such an important token, why does its loss go unremarked? Between bouts of racist grousing about the play's lead that give Mary Preston a run for her money, Thomas Rymer, in a scathing 1693 review, sarcastically wonders whether *Othello*'s moral is "to all good Wives, that they look well to their Linnen" (132).

And while modern critics are considerably kinder to the play on this matter,⁶ there is something crucial that has gone unobserved in most readings of this scene. Simply put: as the boy actor playing Desdemona reaches out with the handkerchief, drawing it close to the other actor's head in an offer to bind it, he risks smearing the makeup on the face of the actor playing Othello. And at this moment, *Othello* stands a chance of ending differently: what if Othello allows Desdemona to bind his head, reconciling with her, and perhaps, in the application of the handkerchief, the blackface makeup smears, shattering the play's artifice and revealing the white man the audience has known was onstage all along?

Instead, Othello abruptly lashes out, causing Desdemona to drop the handkerchief—upholding the dramatic illusion that his face is black and becoming, like Wit, marked both in his error and his estrangement from his lover. Indeed, like Wit, he will soon become unrecognizable: “Is this the noble Moor whom our full senate / Call all in all sufficient?” (4.1.264–65). Mary Preston's version of *Othello* thus nicely encapsulates the racial ambivalence at the heart of the play: Shakespeare's drama is predicated on the fantasy that this might have gone differently, that, in the phantasmal logic of early modern blackface performance, blackness might not be essential or permanent, and that Othello might (but only might) have been a “white man” after all.

Whiteness and Poisoned Sight

Othello ends with the injunction both to look and to look away. “Look on the tragic loading of this bed,” the Venetian diplomat Lodovico orders Iago, directing also the audience's attention to Othello and Desdemona's bed, where their corpses as well as Emilia's are now piled: “This is thy work. The object poisons sight, let it be hid” (5.2.361–63). The audience is confronted with the ‘Moor’ they have seen and then left to imagine him as he was or might have been as the curtain falls. Shakespeare and his play participate in what Arthur Little has called “melancholic whiteness,” the attempt to shore up a white subjectivity that is haunted by the racial Others that it categorically rejects but also requires for its self-understanding. “Whiteness,” Little writes, “always already signals a failure of those who construct themselves around and through an ideology of whiteness to ever truly become ontologically so” (“Re-Historicizing Race” 92). As Little's

diagnosis implies, melancholic whiteness devours the self-reflective space of subjectivity, leaving blackness flat, subjectless, and dehumanized at its margins. Hari Ziyad sharply summarizes the modern consequences of this process: “Blackness cannot exist as humanness within the realm that whiteness conceives. Black lives cannot matter under the standards of whiteness, by necessity and design” (147).

In the torsions by which Shakespeare’s play figures Othello as both black and white, one can see the creakiness of its racial thinking and the rapaciousness of the white subjectivity it constructs—a paranoid subjectivity still at work today. The play establishes race for a viable medium of ‘seeing as,’ and the tragic arc of *Othello* shows Shakespeare aligning a catastrophic end with an intractable blackness that lingers in the mind of the spectator long after the curtain falls. By working so insistently to highlight the racial impersonation of the actor playing Othello, Shakespeare’s play also offers a glimmer of hope for an entire cultural and critical lineage loath to imagine the supposedly “hideous” sight of a black hero or an interracial union (Neill 394–95). But by also insisting that this “stage decoration”—the actor’s blackface makeup—is really and truly there, that it is quite objectively ‘real’ within the world of the play, *Othello* doubles back on its offered relief.

The play goads its audience to see racialized color difference as both part of a temporary dramatic diversion and as a real and immanent quality of non-theatrical bodies. Furthermore, by drawing on theatrical practices that align blackness with sin, folly, ignorance, and nonhuman materiality, it produces what Ian Smith calls the “agonistic subject-object relation whose purpose is to install whiteness as cultural plenitude,” in that it supposes the actor’s white “body beneath” is the potential but foregone remedy for all the character’s troubles (“White Skin, Black Masks” 60). This centralization of a white (or rather whitened) imagination evokes what Ziyad calls blackness’s “nonhuman objectivity”—blackness figured as the constitutive, nonhuman limit or “outside” to a whitened, humanized subjectivity (151), an idea given a grim literalness in the early modern staging of a nonblack actor seemingly ‘trapped’ within a cosmetically blackened body. Shakespeare’s play dangles the hope of whiteness before its audience but does not deliver, offering instead the phantasmal materiality of performed blackness that thrusts the white subject into racial paranoia. As in the case of the Rodney King jury or Darren Wilson, whiteness and

white supremacy cohere in opposition to the presumed objective and immanent reality of the blackness they see—or rather, the racialized blackness they imagine they see, even if, like Mary Preston, they would rather imagine they do not see it at all.

Notes

1. Though Ridley himself is also infamously uneasy regarding Othello's race; see Ridley and Newman on Ridley (especially 143–45).
2. Cognitive researchers Fauconnier and Turner developed conceptual blending theory (CBT) to explain how the mind generates new meaning through synthesizing inputs from otherwise distinct or unrelated cognitive categories.
3. An example Fauconnier and Turner use is a magazine report on a 1993 “race” where a catamaran attempted to sail from San Francisco to Boston faster than another boat had in 1853. Though the boats were not sailing simultaneously, the magazine's choice to cover the event as a race is comprehensible because our minds blend the concept of a race with the knowledge that the earlier vessel accomplished the journey within a time limit the more recent one set out to beat (63–65).
4. The first, *The Marriage of Wit and Science*, was published anonymously in 1570 and possibly performed at court in 1567 or 1568. The second, *The Marriage between Wit and Wisdom* (1579), is attributed to Cambridge student and eventual preacher and schoolmaster Francis Merbury. All three versions of the interlude deploy face-blackening as a device to show Wit's fall into witlessness, but they also highlight it as a theatrical convention and are emphatic about its changeability.
5. See also Hall 12–13, where Best is considered alongside other travel writers who take the permanence of complexion as a sign of inherent national identity.
6. See Smith, “Othello's Black Handkerchief” 1–25, which summarizes much of the critical work on the subject to date while providing a thorough critique of the assumptions that readers and critics have made about the handkerchief itself.

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