Shakespeare

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rshk20

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To cite this article: Matthieu Chapman (2023): Shakespeare for Everyone? History, Dramaturgy, and the Black Flesh as Prop in Transracial Shakespeare, Shakespeare, DOI: 10.1080/17450918.2023.2183091

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17450918.2023.2183091

Published online: 16 Mar 2023.

SHAKESPEARE
https://doi.org/10.1080/17450918.2023.2183091

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Shakespeare for Everyone? History, Dramaturgy, and the Black Flesh as Prop in Transracial Shakespeare

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ABSTRACT

In this autoethnographic essay, the author reflects upon and interrogates racialised trends in American theatre stemming from participation as the silent role of 'Othello's man' in a college production of *Othello*. Using black flesh as an object to be exploited for cultural capital by white theatregoers and theatremakers, the author adopts an Afro-Pessimist methodology to consider how non-speaking black characters in early modern dramatic performance become a spectacle emptied of actual agency or 'being', akin to a stage property. The inclusion of black actors in mostly white Shakespeare productions often leads to mental anguish for the performers, who inevitably become enmeshed in the anti-blackness of Shakespeare's dramaturgy.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 21 December 2022
Accepted 17 February 2023

KEYWORDS
Universality; identity; colonialism; slavery; voice

Shakespeare for Everyone. It is a clarion call for inclusivity and representation, a declaration that the works of William Shakespeare: a white Englishman who died 400 years ago; who wrote plays to appease slave traders and imperialists; who denigrated races, genders, nations, and religions other than his own, have something to offer everyone. Institutions from the Royal Shakespeare Company to the Folger Shakespeare Library have deployed this discourse.[1] Cherrytree Books publishes a series of editions titled 'Shakespeare for Everyone'. Even luminaries in the field of Pre-Modern Critical Race Studies such as Patricia Akhimie have, while critiquing notions of Shakespeare as Universal, adopted the logic of Shakespeare for Everyone by attempting to make the bard speak to a more diverse audience.[2]

I used to believe in Shakespeare for Everyone. One of my earliest roles in the theatre was in Shakespeare's *Othello*. I was a first-generation college student in my third year of undergraduate studies, and I had only become aware of the

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[1]See 'Shakespeare for Everyone' by the Royal Shakespeare Company's Education department at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M1VCPXloa5s; and Kara Marziali has a piece for the Folger's *Teaching Shakespeare Blog* titled 'Shakespeare for Everyone'. https://teachingshakespeareblog.folger.edu/2016/01/12/shakespeare-for-everyone/. Interestingly, in the RSC's video, the first twelve bodies we see speak are white, and no black people get to speak.

[2]Shapiro, A. L. 'Black Theater Artists Are Helping Shakespeare Speak To More Diverse Audiences', *All Things Considered*, NPR, 29 July 2021, https://www.npr.org/transcripts/1019258187

theatre as an option for me the previous semester when I was pulled off the street by a young Chicano professor and put onto the stage in his production of Naomi Iizuka's *SKIN*. Now, in my first semester as a theatre major, I auditioned for and was cast in one of the greatest tragedies of Western literature. Here I was: a young, black man from West Virginia who had read a play for the first time only eight months ago now strutting the boards in the pinnacle of white culture.

Did I mention I wasn't playing Othello?

Even though I am black, and Othello is the only role in the play that explicitly calls for an actor marked by physiognomous difference from the presumed white Venetians – and I would argue to maintain the dramaturgical coherence of the story, Othello needs to be the only role played by a non-white actor – I was not the eponymous 'Moor'. That privilege went to my friend Larry, a much more experienced and talented actor than I. But the director liked me and wanted me to get experience, so he created a place for me as Othello's 'man'. While the text includes in the dramatis personae 'Gentlemen of Cyprus, Sailors, Servants, Attendants, Officers, Messengers, Herald, Musicians, Torchbearers', the play calls for only one Moor, no Negroes, and certainly no Black Americans.[3] Since the title page and dramatis personae did not explicitly exclude the appearance of other non-white bodies, our director decided that he wanted Othello to have a man of his own – a confidant and a link to his homeland who would appear alongside the Moor as his guard. And since the director gave the character no lines, my appearance did not technically alter the text.

It was 2004. I was 20 years old and new to theatre, so I was just excited that the director cast me. So much so, in fact, that I did not question what my presence did to the text and the narrative. Suppose Othello has a confidant constantly onstage with him, someone from his homeland with whom he has a long history predating his arrival in Europe. Why was that confidant, me, never allowed to say, 'Nah, brah, Iago's on one', and end the story before it starts? I was so excited to be cast that I did not question what thoughts and analyses my presence would invoke in the audience. I did not ask what effect my role had outside of the world of the play. Nor did I ask who my presence was serving. On the one hand, I was being provided an opportunity as a black man to appear in a show that would otherwise exclude me. On the other hand, I was trans-racially cast into a role that did not account for my blackness and required me to ignore its very real, very lived ontological positional outside of society for the play to function dramaturgically was an immense, potentially damaging, psychological challenge. I had to appear on

[3]The 1622 quarto of the play calls for 'servants with torches' (B3r), 'attendants with torches' (B3v), 'attendants' (C1r, K1r, L2v), 'officers' (B4r, C1v, N1v), 'messenger' (C1r, D3r), 'the rest' (C3v), 'gentlemen' (D2r, D3v, E3v, G1r), 'others with lights and weapons' (B4v), and 'others' (E4v, E2r). See William Shakespeare, *Tragoedy of Othello, the Moore of Venice* (London: N. Oakes and T. Walkey, 1622), STC 22305.

stage in black flesh while simultaneously denying all parts of my existence as a black being. The performance forced me to experience a bifurcated existence where black being had to be separated and removed from black flesh for my appearance not to obliterate the narrative. My performance played out Saidiya Hartman's critique of storytelling in an anti-black world, that 'it just seems that every attempt to emplot the slave in a narrative ultimately resulted in his or her obliteration'.[4] I could appear as black in the play, but I could not *be* black in the play.

Looking back on the production and how my role as a non-Othello black man interacts with the history and culture of both the early modern English and American stages raises questions that challenge the value of Shakespeare for Everyone. While I agree that inclusion and representation are important steps on the road to equality, our desire for inclusivity and representation often occludes deeper issues of how the races of the performers interact with the histories and presents of race in America. In our drive to make Shakespeare for Everyone, we gloss over the question of whether Shakespeare should be desirable to everyone. The works of Shakespeare – their history, their narratives, and their dramaturgy – are inextricably intertwined with imperialism, misogyny, antisemitism, and anti-blackness. As such, Shakespeare's works contain elements that are incompatible with non-white, non-male, non-Christian, and non-English bodies, making transracial, transgender, trans-religious, and trans-national casting a potentially damaging endeavour for those very same people primarily white institutions in theatre (PWI Theatres) seek to include and represent.

While gender, religion, and nationality are important constituent elements of identity, focusing on all of these various categories of difference is outside the scope of this essay. The issue of trans-ontological casting – of putting black flesh in the role of a non-black, human body – has particular implications otherwise easily missed when grouped in a more capacious approach. Black flesh occupies a unique and specific position within the lexicon of theatrical conventions both in early modern England and America. Both institutions have long histories of staging black flesh that challenge the subjectivity of black beings by presenting their black flesh as an object to be exploited for cultural capital by white theatregoers and theatremakers: non-speaking black characters on the early modern English stage and Blackface Minstrelsy in America. Analysing my performance in *Othello* in the context of these dehumanising theatrical practices allows us to read anti-blackness as embedded in the dramaturgy of both Shakespeare's text and the theatre's ontology. These practices will enable us to read the transracial casting of black flesh into Shakespeare's plays as a re-performance of these two anti-black conventions for modern audiences. In

[4]Hartman, Saidiya and Frank B. Wilderson. 'The Position of the Unthought'. *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 183–201 at 184.

their performance, these tropes capitalise on black flesh at the expense of black being, rendering the former a stage property while obliterating the latter.

The interconnectedness between objects and blackness in early modern England is a topic that has received some attention in scholarship. Most notable among these is Kim Hall, who argues that, '[t]he placement of black faces on furniture, flasks, signs, lights, and other artifacts indicates that dark-skinned Africans were objects of symbolic importance and cultural exchange long before they became a numerically significant group in the English population'.[5] This discourse on black objecthood continues in analyses of blackness and materiality on the early modern stage in the study of props. A stage property, or prop for short, is any material object that is moveable by the actors. This can be anything from Desdemona's handkerchief in *Othello* to Aaron and Tamora's baby in *Titus Andronicus*. I would even expand to include in this definition costume pieces such as crowns and prosthetics. Although largely marginalised in studies of the early modern English stage, Johnathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda argue that, 'the objects of the early modern stage were often intended not merely to catch, but to overwhelm the eye by means of their real or apparent costliness, motion, and capacity to surprise'.[6] This function of props resonates in the work of Pre-Modern Critical Race scholars who interrogate the performance of blackness on early modern Stages. As Ian Smith argues, 'the actual representation of Africans or Moors on the stage required prosthetic devices that articulated black identity as wholly material and insubstantial and whose radically metonymic function – the part for the whole – confirmed the symbolically partial and incomplete identity of the African set against the authentic white body beneath'.[7] Farah-Karim Cooper recounts the various methods available to early modern English theatre practitioners for performing race, from vizards to cosmetics, arguing for various methods to lighten and darken actors to accentuate the black/white racial binary of the period and their various semiotic designations.[8]

These analyses of black objecthood – while making cogent arguments about the status of blackness within Early Modern English society – become questionable when we move beyond the humanist assumptive logic that undergirds the construction of race in American public life and challenge how these fields define humanity, especially in relation to blackness. This is to say, both history and theatre as academic fields and public institutions invite society to *assume* that the human is a stable, coherent being. This assumption precludes

[5]Hall, Kim F. *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England*, 212. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995.

[6]Harris, Jonathan Gil, and Natasha Korda, 'Introduction'. In *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama*, 4. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

[7]Smith, Ian. 'White Skin, Black Masks: Racial Cross-Dressing on the Early Modern Stage'. *Renaissance Drama* 32 (2003): 33–67, p. 34.

[8]Farah-Karim Cooper, 'The Materials of Race: Staging the Black and White Binary in the Early Modern Theatre'. In *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race*, edited by Ayanna Thompson, 17-29. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.

questioning the possibility that the human is a social construct – a collection of signifiers and power dynamics with no divine meaning. As such, common discourse, both lay and academic, views race as a division within humanity without questioning the possibility that race functions at various levels of abstraction. Pre-Modern Critical Race Studies primarily deploys a humanist assumptive logic in its discourse. In arguing for the existence of race in the medieval period, Geraldine Heng defines race as 'one of the primary names we have … to demarcate human beings through differences *among humans* that are selectively essentialized as absolute and fundamental, in order to distribute position and powers differently to *human groups*'.[9] Noémie Ndiaye, whose work focuses on Renaissance Europe, argues that race is understood as 'the power structure that allows a dominant social group to select a human group based on a variety of criteria (such as religion, class, ethnicity, physical appearance) and to imagine this group as endowed with a set of essential and hereditary traits that warrant its position in the social hierarchy'.[10] In both cases, Heng and Ndiaye position race as a set of power relations within humanity, thus assuming that blackface performance in the early modern represents another type of human.

What happens when the material marking objecthood is not inanimate matter but animate black flesh? While Heng and Ndiaye offer definitions that describe race within a humanist framework, I would like to propose a different theoretical project. This essay looks to analyse the appearance of black flesh in the works of Shakespeare on contemporary stages through a framework that challenges the construction of the human, extending the stage beyond identity politics: Afro-Pessimism.[11]

Afro-Pessimism is a theoretical discourse that critiques the human as a construct determined through its relation to blackness, such as when, for example, the 'human' defines itself through not being black. While most literature and theory that scholars consider part of the Afro-Pessimist discourse focuses on the existence and afterlives of chattel slavery in America, much of the literature engages with broader temporal and geographic boundaries of black inhumanity. Hortense Spillers's *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar*

[9]Heng, Geraldine. 'The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages II: Locations of Medieval Race 1'. *Literature Compass* 8, no. 5 (2011): 332–350.332.

[10]Noémie Ndiaye, ''Everyone Breeds in His Own Image': Staging the Aethiopica across the Channel', *Renaissance Drama* 44, no. 2 (2016): 158.

[11]Frank Wilderson defines the libidinal economy through the works of Jared Sexton and Antonio Gramsci as follows: 'Jared Sexton describes libidinal economy as 'the economy, or distribution and arrangement, of desire and identification (their condensation and displacement), and the complex relationship between sexuality and the unconscious'. Needless to say, libidinal economy functions variously across scales and is as 'objective' as political economy. Importantly, it is linked not only to forms of attraction, affection, and alliance, but also to aggression, destruction, and the violence of lethal consumption. He emphasizes that it is 'the whole structure of psychic and emotional life', something more than, but inclusive of or traversed by, what Gramsci and other Marxists call a 'structure of feeling'; it is 'a dispensation of energies, concerns, points of attention, anxieties, pleasures, appetites, revulsions, and phobias capable of both great mobility and tenacious fixation'. See Wilderson 2010, p. 9.

Book expresses the desire to make 'a distinction … between 'body' and 'flesh' and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions', and uses evidence from multiple periods and regions ranging from late medieval Europe through postbellum America to construct a continuum of anti-blackness that distinguishes black 'captive flesh' from the non-black 'human body'.[12] Hartman further expounds on the position of black flesh in relation to the human body, arguing that blacks suffer differently from the human subject at the ontological level. According to Hartman, the human subject suffers through a grammar of alienation and exploitation while the black suffers through a grammar of accumulation and fungibility. More recently, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's *Becoming Human* challenges Enlightenment philosophy's obsession with black animality not to define blackness ontologically, but rather to expand the possibilities of black inhumanity in a manner that destabilises the construction of the human through anti-blackness.[13] As these examples capture, Afro-Pessimism challenges the assumption that Frank Wilderson made when coining the term: that 'Africans went into the ships and came out as black'.[14]

Afro-Pessimism offers a unique frame for analysing the first theatrical convention that black flesh re-performs in modern productions of Shakespeare: the unnamed, non-speaking black character. While most audiences are familiar with the few large-scale 'black' characters in Shakespeare's works – namely the eponymous Moor in *Othello* and Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* – fewer audiences are aware of the stage direction *Enter Blackamoors with music* in *Love's Labour's Lost*.[15] While early modern playing companies certainly used props to blacken up non-black actors to portray black characters, I have argued in previous work that the large number of nameless, voiceless black characters combined with the difficulty in removing blackening cosmetics, the non-realistic nature of vizards, and the small number of company members to create scenarios in which companies would likely have used actual black flesh for fill these roles.[16] These black characters do not function dramaturgically the same as those who speak and participate in the conflict and dramatic action. I then link this flesh to stage props, arguing that, 'in addition to the more than one hundred named speaking blacks in these plays, we can find at least thirty-five black characters who have no name, do not speak, and serve no purpose other than to increase the performance of power for other characters or to heighten the play's spectacular qualities'.[17] In other words, they are made into props.

[12]Spillers, Hortense J. 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book'. *diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81 at 67.
[13]Jackson, Zakiyyah Iman. *Becoming Human.* New York: New York University Press, 2020.
[14]Wilderson III, Frank B. 'Red, White & Black'. In *Red, White & Black*, 39. Duke University Press, 2010.
[15]I place black in scare quotes here because while Othello and Aaron are largely considered black by both scholars and audiences, I argue in my book that Othello is not and cannot be black for the dramaturgy of the play to function.
[16]Chapman, Matthieu A. 'The Appearance of Blacks on the Early Modern Stage:' Love's Labour's Lost's' African Connections to Court'. *Early Theatre* (2014): 77–94, p. 86.

These staged blacks did not exist in a vacuum. Black flesh on the stage in sixteenth – and seventeenth-century England was part of a larger cultural fascination with black flesh as a multifaceted form of capital. Hall analyzes this phenomenon, arguing that, 'the 'black skin' of both male and female attendants becomes a key signifier … associated with wealth and luxury, it is the necessary element for the fetishization of white skin'.[18] In the cases of both the theatrical stage and the households of the wealthy, blackness served the same purpose: to be collected and traded in as a source of capital for the owner. I took the analysis of black flesh and its relation to capital further, articulating that onstage, black beings occupy a position of interlocutionary incapacity in relation to the human subject, and thus become the basis for relationality between non-black humans. I argued that, 'the ontological implications of owning and controlling blackness were valued at a level of abstraction that cannot be quantified within the realm of human experience, allowing blackness to function as a form of ontological capital that subjects used to control and substantiate their presence'.[19] In other words, black flesh on the early modern stage, even when speaking, lacked the capacity to be heard by subjects. Instead, the flesh was only *seen* by subjects to confirm the presence of the subject controlling the black spectacle.

This division between the spectacle of black flesh for the non-black subject and the erasure of black agency and interiority by denying black flesh a voice divides blackness on the early modern stage into two parts: the black being is obliterated while the black flesh is transformed into a prop. As such, the animate black flesh of servants and players and the inanimate black objects performed similar functions as a marker of subjectivity for the owners of such objects; however, living black flesh functioned to produce capital that confirmed not only the owners' wealth and luxury, but their very being and existence as human. The flesh was unable to hail itself as a being, existing instead as a visage that spoke to the being of the owner. When placing black flesh in a non-black role in Shakespeare today, PWI Theatres re-perform this early modern dynamic. When performing the roles of Hamlet or Macbeth, the black actor does not gain the voice denied him in the early modern period; instead, the actor speaks as a character whose existence interacts with a dramaturgy of anti-blackness. Ayanna Thompson acknowledges the anti-blackness of Shakespeare's dramaturgy in *Othello,* arguing that the play is irredeemable. Thompson recognises that,

> we keep recirculating [*Othello, Merchant of Venice,* and *Taming of the Shrew*] with this idea that they're good for you, people always want to - they're, like … I'm finally going to do the one that reveals the full complexity of Othello's character. But they don't end up working.[20]

[17]Ibid.
[18]Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 211.
[19]Chapman, Matthieu. *Anti-Black Racism in Early Modern English Drama: The Other 'Other'*, 56. Routledge, 2016.
[20]Ayanna Thompson says that there are three Shakespeare plays that resist rehabilitation: *Othello, Merchant of Venice, and Taming of the Shrew*. She questions the damage done to actors forced to play horrendous

In the case of Othello, Thompson's reading is in part informed by her dramaturg experiences, having been brought in to productions to help black actors struggling with the mental anguish caused by performing a role that is not portraying a black man, but rather a role portraying a white man's – Shakespeare's – anxieties about blackness infiltrating English society.[21] This resonates with my own formative experience in a non-speaking black role, as I too was put in a position where my appearance on the stage caused immense psychological turmoil. But I was not Othello. The anti-blackness, I discovered, was not contained to the character, but rather a function of the narrative and dramaturgy. As such, I was not performing abjection and anxiety like Othello does. I instead re-enacted my own ontological nothingness in an anti-black world.

Focusing on these few irredeemable plays – *Othello* for racism, *Merchant* for antisemitism, and *Taming* for misogyny – problematically suggests that they operate in a vacuum as separate from Shakespeare's other works. The issues that make these plays irredeemable is not confined to a few problematic texts, but resonates throughout the dramaturgy of Shakespeare's entire canon and his contemporaries. Thompson is correct when she argues that Shakespeare helped to crystallize our modern epistemologies of race, although she stops short of recognising the ways in which these epistemologies undergird the logic of Shakespeare's entire canon.[22] In a culture so obsessed with collecting and profiting from blackness, both as flesh and inanimate object, divorcing specific works from the larger cultural context risks perpetrating a dangerous act of erasure. Other scholars, however, acknowledge the ways in which anti-blackness informs the entire world of Shakespeare's work. As I have argued elsewhere, Lysander's rejection of Hermia as an 'Ethiope' and 'Tawny Tartar' exists as part of a four-hundred-year continuum of blackness existing as outside the bounds of human affective engagement.[23] This is of a piece with Jamie Paris's claim that the anti-black racism toward the Prince of Morocco and the unnamed negro woman in *Merchant of Venice* mobilises that play's construction of whiteness.[24] More recently, Thompson argues that *Macbeth* is the 'Blackest play that people don't think is about race'.[25] These works of Shakespeare, while ostensibly outside of the typical discourse on race, reveal how anti-blackness still informs both narrative and dramaturgy even absent

stereotypes of Black and Jewish people and perform scenes of gaslighting and abuse. See: Demby, Gene (Host). 21 August 2019. *All That Glisters Is Not Gold*. Code Switch. NPR. https://www.npr.org/transcripts/752850055

[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid.

[23]Chapman, Matthieu. ''Away, You Ethiop!': A Midsummer Night's Dream and the Denial of Black Affect – A Song to Underscore the Burning of Police Stations'. In *Race and Affect in Early Modern English Literature*, edited by Carol Mejia LaPerle. Tempe, Az: ACMRS Press, 2022.

[24]Paris, Jamie. ''Mislike Me Not for My Complexion': On Anti-Black Racism and Performative Whiteness in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*'. *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 20 (2020): 34–61. doi:10.1353/jem.2020.0029.

[25]Schama, Chloe. 'Daniel Craig and Ruth Negga Star in Broadway's New Macbeth, a Cathartic Release for Our Times'. *Vogue.com*. 23 March 2022. Accessed 25 April 2022. https://www.vogue.com/article/daniel-craig-ruth-negga-macbeth

black flesh on the stage. As such, while putting black flesh onto contemporary stages in the works of Shakespeare may be an act of representation, doing so also perpetuates the early modern notion of black flesh producing ontological capital for the audience and company, essentially functioning as a Trojan Horse for racism: the audience feels good about seeing black flesh in Shakespeare while the anti-blackness contained in the dramaturgy continues. Instead of gaining a voice through the text, the black flesh performs its voicelessness by speaking white words and re-performing the denial of its own beings.

The issues that occur when staging black flesh in non-black roles in Shakespeare's plays are exacerbated when this occurs on American stages. The earliest non-indigenous performance mode in America was blackface minstrelsy, and this particularly problematic history and dramaturgy of staging black bodies haunts black flesh on the American stage.[26] Although blackface revelries have a history in America dating back to the late-eighteenth century, scholars most often associate T. D. Rice with the form's movement into the mainstream. Rice had his first performances in the 1820s, and by 1832 his 'Jim Crow' character had become the staple of his act.[27] For those unfamiliar, blackface minstrelsy was initially white performers donning black makeup with exaggerated lips and noses and creating horrific, denigrating caricatures of black life and black culture. While America society has condemned this performance over the past two decades, and only when it was not funny to them or performed by someone they love like Jimmy Kimmel or in Tina Fey's *30 Rock*, blackface caricatures and their tropes were a significant part of popular culture well into the 1940s and 1950s, as seen in properties from major media corporations such as Disney in *Song of the South* and *Fantasia*, and in Warner Brothers' *Looney Tunes* cartoons.[28] Although these companies have worked to coverup their racist pasts and have since moved away from the caricatures, we still see these minstrel stock forms resonate in television and film, such as the recurrent black drug dealer or criminal, or the 'magic negro' who shows up to aid a white character in their journey, such as Bagger Vance played by Will Smith (2000) and many Morgan Freeman roles such as Red in *Shawshank Redemption* (1994), God in *Bruce Almighty* (2003), Azeem in *Robin Hood* (1991), and Lucius Fox in the *Batman Begins* franchise (2005, 2008, 2012). So while the specific form of minstrelsy is no longer a mainstream

[26]Thompson, Ayanna. *Blackface*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2021.
[27]Bean, Annemarie, James V. Hatch, and Mel Watkins. *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy*, 7. Wesleyan University Press, 1996.
[28]See: Sperb, Jason. *Disney's Most Notorious Film: Race, Convergence, and the Hidden Histories of Song of the South*. University of Texas Press, 2012; and Brode, Douglas. *Multiculturalism and the Mouse: Race and Sex in Disney entertainment*. University of Texas Press, 2005; Warner Bros. actually has a 'censored 11' cartoons that were banned from syndication in 1968 for being too racist. See: Breau, Richard M. 'Selected Black Animated Fairy Tales from Coal Black to'. *Fairy Tales with a Black Consciousness: Essays on Adaptations of Familiar Stories* (2013).

popular mode, an Afro-Pessimist lens reveals the pervasive persistence of its dramaturgy.

While blackface minstrelsy is a specific art form that relies on specific performance and cosmetic conventions, the purposes and effects of blackface are larger than mere denigration of blackness. Eric Lott, in the introduction to *Inside the Minstrel Mask*, describes blackface minstrelsy as 'an arena in which the efficient expropriation of the cultural commodity 'blackness' occurred', or, as Frederick Douglass more aggressive (and accurately) described it 'the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money and pander to the corrupt taste of their fellow white citizens'.[29] More recently, Douglas A. Jones, Jr., argued that the white people's investment in black culture was crucial to the development of white cultural and political formations, stating that, 'the socioeconomic and racial conditions that shaped and surrounded minstrelsy … helped foster the development of white, working-class Northerners' distinct brand of anti-black, proslavery thought, a worldview intended to bring about their own betterment'.[30] This appropriation of black flesh to pander to other whites and to bring about the betterment of white society interacts with the early modern desire to exploit blackness for the confirmation of non-black subjectivity. In early America, however, this desire became so prevalent that by 1848, the minstrel show became the national art form and a mode to translate other art forms such as opera for a general audience.

When minstrelsy does make it into theatrical discourse, the discussion primarily engages with white minstrel performers in blackface. After abolition, however, blackface minstrelsy became a common performance mode for black performers as well. When writing about black performers in minstrel shows at an exhibit called Old Plantation during the 1901 Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York, Amma Y. Ghartey-Tagoe Kootin reveals that the some one hundred and fifty performers touted as 'genuine southern darkies' were actually performers trained at a school to perform 'authentic' blackness by a white man named Fred McClellan.[31] Kootin argues that,

> At a time when Jim Crow laws and lynchings were on the rise, these propositions are disturbing and make the school not so much a performing arts academy as a training ground for black people to learn how to embody the type of 'darkey' that could be accepted by whites. That type of 'darkey' was a white creation from the minstrel stage, a caricature of black culture that not only came to be known as an accurate representation of black people but also defined and constructed blackness itself.[32]

[29]Bean, Hatch, and Lott, *Minstrel Mask*, 3, 6.
[30]Jones Jr, Douglas A. 'Black Politics But Not Black People: Rethinking the Social and 'Racial' History of Early Minstrelsy'. *TDR/The Drama Review* 57, no. 2 (2013): 21–37, p, 22.
[31]Ghartey-Tagoe Kootin, Amma Y. 'Lessons in Blackbody Minstrelsy: Old Plantation and the Manufacture of Black Authenticity'. *TDR/The Drama Review* 57, no. 2 (2013): 102–22.
[32]Ibid., 103.

This division of blackness between how black people defined and constructed blackness and how whiteness constructs a palatable blackness mirrors the divide between black flesh and black interiority on the early modern stage. In both instances, black interiority is removed from the stage, leaving only black flesh to operate as spectacle to inform constructions of whiteness and appease white sensibilities.

I argue that inserting black flesh into non-black roles in Shakespeare's plays today is a part of the continuum of separating black being from black flesh and re-performs this function of constructing blackness that is palatable to largely white, liberal audiences. The black flesh performing white culture allows US contemporary audiences to engage their white liberal fantasies of racial reconciliation by constructing a version of blackness that comforts rather than frightens them. As such, the spectacle of black flesh becomes divorced from black interiority, obliterating the parts of black being that do not satisfy these desires. This theorisation of a bifurcated black existence on the stage follows a long tradition of theories of black being as a divided entity. Among the earliest to write about this phenomenon was W. E. B. DuBois, who described the American negro as existing in a state of 'double-consciousness', arguing that:

> the Negro is … gifted with second-sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true selfconsciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. One ever feels his twoness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[33]

Frantz Fanon would describe a further split in the black conscious in which he describes an encounter with a young child who was frightened by Fanon's black skin as:

> In the train it was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person … It was not that I was finding febrile coordinates in the world. I existed triply: I occupied space. I moved toward the other … and the evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared. Nausea … I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors.[34]

This experience of being simultaneously there and not there describes the experience of transracial performance across the black/non-black divide in the works of Shakespeare. The black flesh remains 'there' – visible, readable. The evanescent other, the essence of black being, disappears.

While DuBois and Fanon describe the split of black existence through psychoanalytical means, Wilderson describes the bifurcated existence of blacks in structural terms. For Wilderson, 'blacks are everywhere essential but always excluded', or, as he said in a seminar in 2011, 'blacks are in the world but

[33]DuBois, WEB. *The Souls of Black Folk*, 8. Oxford World Classics. Oxford: Oxford, UP, 2007.
[34]Fanon, Frantz. *Black skin, white masks*, 84. London: Pluto Classics, 2008.

not of the world'.[35] While Wilderson is describing the paradigmatic construction of the world, the same is true for the imagined worlds we place on the stage when producing Shakespeare. To put black flesh 'in the world' of the play, to cast them across racial lines, does not make them 'of the world'. It does not suddenly make the world of the play easily accommodating of their blackness. In fact, the opposite occurs: the collision between blackness and character creates tension between their blackness and the play's dramaturgy. This collision manifests in the black actor as the mental anguish Thompson encounters in productions of *Othello*. She interprets this tension as a result of 'something about this play because it was written for a white man in blackface that is, of course, feeling like it's damaging your soul'.[36] I think Thompson is correct in this argument and would continue that it is not just damaging to the black actor's soul, but their very being. The distinction is that damage to the soul positions the conflict in the psychoanalytic realm of DuBois and Fanon – of seeing oneself both through your eyes and the eyes of the other. Damage to black being shifts the onus for the harm onto the civil society that can neither recognise nor incorporate the humanity of black flesh and, as such, the actor playing Othello is forced to perform the world's denial of his being.

But this denial is not contained solely to black actors playing Othello. I argue that the presence of black flesh in any non-black Shakespearean role re-performs these past theatrical modes in the present. As Marvin Carlson observes, 'one of the universals of performance, both East and West, is its ghostliness, its sense of return, the uncanny but inescapable impression imposed upon its spectators that *we are seeing what we saw before*'.[37] The link between theatre and cultural memory that Carlson analyzes builds on work by Herbert Blau and Richard Schechner, both of whom argued that theatre always engages in an act of re-performance, or, as Joseph Roach puts it, performance is 'the doomed search for originals by continuously auditioning stand-ins'.[38] These theorists works invite a re-reading of contemporary transracial Shakespearean performances within the continuum of prosthetics and objects used by white men to perform blackness, voiceless black characters from the early modern performing the subjectivity and power of white subjects and black bodies performing minstrel shows under the tutelage of white performers who decided what version of blackness would be communicated to the audience. This continuum becomes disrupted by the insertion of black flesh, making available a reading of these performances in relation to Christina Sharpe's notion of 'wake work', a disruptive reading of the relationship between past and present performances. Sharpe argues that '[i]n the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to

[35]Cunningham, Vincent. 'The Argument of Afro-Pessimism'. *The New Yorker*. 13 July 2020. Accessed 25 April 2022. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/07/20/the-argument-of-afropessimism
[36]Demby, Gene (Host). 21 August 2019. *All That Glisters Is Not Gold*. Code Switch. NPR. https://www.npr.org/transcripts/752850055
[37]Carlson, Marvin. *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*, 1. University of Michigan Press, 2003.
[38]Roach, Joseph R. *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, 3. Columbia University Press, 1996.

rupture the present', and in the wake created by the convergence of anti-blackness in history and dramaturgy and the sentient black being on the stage, the black being in the present ruptures.[39] Black flesh that is absent of and antithetical to black interiority becomes the object used to perform blackness in Shakespeare's plays on modern American stages, making black flesh into a prop designed to remake blackness in whiteness's image.

I return here to my transracial performance as the spectacle of a black attendant in the anti-black world of the *Othello*, and I cannot help but shudder at the violence I was subjected to. The tension between the blackness of my body and the anti-blackness of the dramaturgy ultimately resulted in a rupture between my being and my flesh. My flesh became a vacuum, a shell, to fill as the audience saw fit. Inserting my flesh into the world of this play next to this other black man in a narrative that denied our capacity to commune and relate to one another only doubled the torment. Not only did I have to perform my own denial, but I had to participate in a dramaturgy that denied the capacity for blacks not only relate to the world of the play, but also to each other within the play. I was a prop. My Othello was a ventriloquist dummy, an object spouting white words to affirm white subjectivity.

The ghosts of these past performance modes both from early modern England and early America haunt black actors in Shakespearean productions and the audiences who watch them. The continuum of black flesh to affirm the subjectivity of non-black audiences and theatre companies connects the theatres of early modern England, early America, and today. With this continuum laid bare, the question of who values and who is harmed through black representation in Shakespeare's works and at what levels of abstraction do we interpret this value and harm are thrown into stark relief. The mental anguish that Thompson acknowledges torments black actors playing Othello is not only a product of the character being written for a white man in blackface, but also the torment comes from the very dramaturgy of anti-blackness that constructs the play. This dramaturgy appears throughout Shakespeare's canon, making trans-racial casting a re-performance of the same dynamic of a black man playing Othello. When combined with the history of performing black flesh to affirm non-black subjectivity in both the early modern and early American periods, the effects compound. As such, the flesh cannot perform for itself, but rather performs visions of blackness designed to comfort white audiences at the expense of black flesh. Black being in all its living, breathing glory does not appear, only the inanimate prop of black flesh.

Shakespeare may be for everyone, but it is not for all flesh.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

[39]Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, 9. Duke University Press, 2016.