"Othello/me":  
Racial Drag and the Pleasures of Boundary-Crossing with Othello  

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In Othello, the boundary between Self and Other is famously, and perilously, permeable. Othello’s assimilationist efforts to claim a selfhood within the Venetian community leads, for him, to a fatal hybridity: he ends, as Ania Loomba and others have discussed, as the Venetian instrument for slaying the foreign infidel within himself.¹ What I want to examine here is how, in Othello’s performance history, the self/other boundary has long been felt to be permeable in the other direction as well. For centuries, firsthand reports from both actors and audiences have centered on a common theme: the profound emotional intensity of watching or performing the role of Othello, an intensity very frequently (and perhaps surprisingly, given Othello’s status as an “extravagant … stranger”) attributed to a profound identification with the character’s emotional experience.

From its earliest stage history, Othello seems to have aroused strong audience responses: a 1610 letter describing an Oxford performance mentions that the actors “drew tears not only by their speech, but also by their action.”² The particular strain of response I am interested in here, however, is one reported again and again by white audience members and by white (or part-white) actors: the experience, both unnerving and deeply pleasurable, of the loss of ego boundaries, as Othello’s tremendous passion overtakes and even overpowers the actor who plays him, and “swells” or “surges” out into the bodies of those who watch him perform. In the eighteenth century, for instance, Spranger Barry’s immensely popular Othello—known for its slow-building crescendo from
from “dignified and manly forbearance of temper” to “wildness of rage” and “extravagance of passion” 3—seems to have given pleasure because it allowed audiences to experience the crescendo of emotion along with him.4 According to one satisfied reviewer, “[t]he very frame and substance of our hearts was shaken, as if ... we swelled and trembled as he did.”5 Another member of the audience enthused that at the climax of the “volcanic” performance

[...] you could observe the muscles stiffening, the veins distending, and the red blood boiling through his dark skin—a mighty flood of passion accumulating for several minutes—and at length, bearing down its barriers and sweeping onward in thunder, love, reason, mercy all before it. The females, at this point, used invariably to shriek whilst those with stouter nerves grew uproarious in admiration; for my own part, I remember that the thrill it gave me took my sleep the entire night.6

In the early nineteenth century, Edmund Kean’s acclaimed performance of the role was praised for being, in the words of Blackwood’s magazine, the “most terrific exhibition of human passion that has been witnessed on the modern stage.” Like Barry’s, Kean’s Othello generated language of surging and swelling, of pressure exerted against barriers that might not hold: he was like “the heaving of the sea in a storm,” his inner torment “threaten[ing] ... to burst out into a volcano.” Watching Kean opposite William Charles Macready’s Iago, George Henry Lewes remarked “how puny he appeared beside Macready, until the third act, when, roused by Iago’s taunts and insinuations ... he seemed to swell into a stature which made Macready appear small.” The emotional effect on the audience was as powerful as that of Barry’s. His voice, wrote Hazlitt, “struck on the heart like the swelling notes of some divine music, ... [laying] open the very tumult and agony of the soul.” At the conclusion of Kean’s performance, Lewes reported, “old men leaned their heads upon their arms and fairly sobbed.” Byron wept. For at least one audience member, the emotional intensity crossed the line from exciting to just plain terrifying, haunting him even after he left the theater: “I was frightened, alarmed; I cannot account for what I felt. I wished to be away, and saw those eyes all night ... it was too horrible.”7

From the actor’s perspective, the role can be just as emotionally transporting. In the nineteenth century, the actor John Coleman played
Othello opposite Macready’s acclaimed portrayal of Iago. Coleman was terribly nervous about sharing the stage with the famous actor, but by the third act, he had become so caught up in the part, his consciousness of their normal social roles fell away: he began to think of Macready as nothing but his “Ancient,” and, he says, “I remembered only that I was Othello.” When he reached the (bowdlerized) line “Villain be sure you prove my love is false,” he reports losing conscious control of his actions. Contrary to anything practiced in rehearsals:

I sprang upon Iago and seized him by the throat. I remembered nothing until I found that I had literally flung him bodily down upon the stage, and stood above him, erect, and quivering with wrath. The incident was as unprecedented as it was unpremeditated, and its effect upon the audience was electrical. They got up, and cheered, and for some time the progress of the play was interrupted.

As Coleman tells it, the role—at this moment of emotional intensity—had almost literally gotten under his skin. Before taking the stage, he had carefully washed all traces of his dark face makeup off of his hands to avoid smearing the other actors, but, he recalls, “as my excitement increased, the wretched stuff seemed to ooze out of my very pores.” The audience’s interruption of the play allowed Coleman to recollect himself, and to discover that, while he was “carried away by the passion of the scene,” he had actually, to his mortification, left a black handprint on the great Macready’s “beautiful white cashmere dress.” Coleman’s telling of the anecdote suggests that the blackness he thought he had only applied externally had, under the metabolizing influence of emotion, become an internal fact, i.e., something that could seep from his own pores. Once they left the stage, Coleman remembers Macready telling him: “By—— you sprang upon me more like a young tiger than a human being! … the next time you play this part with me, confine your excitement to your mind, and not to your muscles.”

The twentieth century is not immune from such emotional transports. In her tellingly titled memoir Cry God for Larry, Virginia Fairweather, a British socialite, describes a 1965 Moscow performance of Laurence Olivier’s blackface Othello—a performance Fairweather judges the most “real characterisation” yet seen. Olivier’s “characterisation,” of course, relies in large part on use of heavy dark-brown pancake makeup, covering
virtually the entire surface of his body, and his recourse to carefully studied 'exotic' vocal intonations, hand gestures, sauntering carriage, and even, at key moments, eye-rolling. Olivier's crudely literal emphasis on Othello's "black"-ness, painful to watch as it is to us, was a radical gesture in 1965: Olivier was one of the first light-skinned actors to play Othello in black makeup since 1814, when Kean established the tradition of playing him as an olive-skinned Moor. In his autobiography, Olivier boasts that his black Othello was more genuine, more daring, more forceful than the "pale"—he might almost have said "diluted"—Othellos of his immediate predecessors: "I had rejected the modern trend towards a pale coffee-colored compromise, a natural aristocrat ... [a trend which was], I felt, a cop-out" (emphasis mine).10

Olivier's refusal to "compromise" seems greatly to have pleased his mixed English and Russian audience. Virginia Fairweather reports that "there was an audible gasp on Larry's first entrance"—that is, before Olivier has spoken a word, when he has simply appeared onstage in blackface. Fairweather does not describe the actual performance, but stresses that when it concluded:

Suddenly the applause broke out in a mounting, unbelievable storm. Hundreds who had been sitting in the circle vacated their seats which snapped back like thunder and joined those in the stalls, everyone surging towards the stage yelling and cheering at the same time. There was curtain after curtain with the audience pelting the actors with flowers. I noticed that [some of the Russian] ... photographers were on the stage at the side of the bowing actors, but nothing seemed to matter anymore.

In his autobiography, Olivier claims that this first outburst of wild applause lasted for a full thirty-five minutes. Then, says Fairweather, Sir Larry's curtain call "caused the already emotional audience to go mad: total strangers embraced each other—this did not exclude the frigid English—and with tear-stained faces we went backstage to salute Larry and the National who had brought about his triumph."11

During rehearsals for this Othello, Olivier's wife, Joan Plowright, sent him a letter (which he calls "shrewd") advising him on how to handle the part—specifically, how to manage the difficult transition from the civilized Christian of act 1 to the savage infidel of the strangulation scene. Plowright tells Olivier that his rehearsal efforts are
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wildly exciting, beautiful absolutely valid in human terms the split personality of a man who has had to overcome one powerful part of his nature in order to achieve a certain position in the world ... I know that Othello's baser, hidden nature probably wants to find her guilty [when he hears of Cassio's kisses], but the "noble facade" could still struggle this early in the play to keep up its head a little longer ... You don't want yet, if it is humanly possible, to reveal yourself as the naked animal you really are ... but you want proof but if you can get proof and still cling desperately to the last vestiges of the man you once were, it still leaves you plenty of opportunity in the next scenes with her for the final revelation of the mad beast.12

Virginia Fairweather says little about the exact source of the Moscow audience's response to Olivier's Othello, but it stands to reason that such a "final revelation of the mad beast" played a key role in releasing their weeping and cheers. The "revelation" that Othello is not after all a "natural aristocrat"—a notion Olivier himself called a "cop-out"—but rather that he is "really," in the depths of his "baser, hidden nature," a "naked animal" validates a kind of group release of social inhibition, an almost libidinal freedom to "storm" and "thunder," throw flowers, cry and "embrace total strangers."

About two decades later, the actor Ben Kingsley received an invitation to play Othello, an invitation that reached him while he was in Marakesh, filming Harem with Nastassja Kinski. Having already relished dressing in kaftan and sandals and "exploring not only Marakesh but the internal landscape of the [Arab] Prince I was portraying," Kingsley jumped at the chance to play Shakespeare's Moor. As he imagined taking on the part, he came to regard it as an opportunity to release a part of himself that he normally repressed, feeling "as if something dormant were being roused." Kingsley, raised in England, is himself of mixed ancestry—his father, born in Africa, is of Gujerat Indian descent, and his mother is a white Englishwoman—yet he speaks of that "something dormant" in himself in racially essentialist terms, and with a distinctly colonialist eye. Playing Othello, he says, allowed him to get in touch with that part of himself that was "predisposed to the temperament and pace around me [in Marakesh]: the fraternally sensual embraces of the men; the young women emerging from purdah, vulnerable, beautiful, and still startled; the sipping of mint tea ... the stillness of [the bedouins and] ... the potential violence of them."13 Embodying
Othello, in other words, promises a cultural smorgasbord of “exotic” pleasures a self-identified Englishman cannot usually openly embrace: homoeroticism, women still carrying the erotically piquant signs of recent submission, and (especially) the exciting threat of bedouin violence—all available to his gaze or consumable as mint tea.

For Kingsley, identification with the role was profound: he often speaks of the character he was creating as “Othello/me.” In this Othello/me, he says, he found an expression for his capacity for “great and sudden violence” that had always coexisted with his “need for harmony and peace”; as Kingsley tells it, during rehearsals, something akin to Plowright’s “mad beast” began to make its way out from the hidden depths of his personality—“a being emerged who, if provoked at a primal level, would react with the violence of a psychopath.” The experience proved a difficult one psychologically, as the boundary between “Othello” and “me” threatened to permanently dissolve:

Only those who have played Othello know how uniquely distressing the role can sometimes be. When the barriers dissolve, when pressures on the actor and the dilemma of the character fuse into a subjective pain in front of your audience then these are dark nights, and no amount of applause can set the actor free. The very soul seems metabolized. The play smoulders on in the body and brain until the early hours...It took all my physical and mental powers to maintain my passionate indifference, to confine the ‘afterswell’ to the theatre...[which if I failed to do] I’d perish.14

Clearly, the play’s ability to make Spranger Barry’s audience shriek and lose their sleep, to allow Virginia Fairweather’s “frigid English” to “go mad” and embrace total strangers, and to allow Kingsley’s “dormant” impulses to be “aroused” hinges on its invocation of racial and cultural Otherness. The eighteenth-century actor David Garrick spoke explicitly of his belief that the emotional intensity of the role depended directly on Othello’s status as nonwhite:

[Shakespeare] had shown us white men jealous in other pieces, but that their jealousy had limits, and was not so terrible...[in] Othello, he had wished to paint that passion in all its violence, and that is why he chose an African in whose being circulated fire instead of blood, and whose true or imaginary character could excuse all boldnesses of expression and all exaggerations of passion. (my emphasis)

As one reviewer of Spranger Barry’s Othello put it, Barry’s performance
displayed the essence of “the impetuous ferocity natural to one of Othello’s complexion.” According to an equally racist account by Margaret Webster, director of the 1942 Paul Robeson Othello, the power of the role requires an essential divergence from the “religion, morals, conventions, and habits of living” of white Europeans, a divergence directly defined by race. For Webster, an ideal Othello will be

profound and dangerous, primitive in simplicity, primitive also in violence, alien in blood. The gulf which divides him from Desdemona, once their first concord has been broken, is much more than a difference of pigmentation, though this is an essential part of it. It is a gulf between two races, one old and soft in the ways of civilization, the other close to the jungle and the burning, desert sands.15

The metaphorical language Webster uses, along with the language used to review Barry’s, Kean’s, and Olivier’s performances, and to describe Coleman’s and Kingsley’s experience with the role, is tellingly rich in images of the natural, especially a conception of the natural as something unconfinable, something that penetrates or burns or surges uncontrollably past civilized limits: “thunder,” “mighty flood,” “red blood boiling,” “heaving … sea,” “volcano,” “mounting unbelievable storm,” “afterswell,” “the jungle and the burning, desert sands.” Similar metaphors are repeated endlessly in reviews and descriptions of other Othello performances from the eighteenth century on;16 even in the late twentieth century, one would be rather hard-pressed to find an enthusiastic review of an Othello that did not employ at least one of the following terms: “tiger,” “lion,” “panther,” “jaguar,” “wild beast,” “wild animal,” “volcano,” “fire,” “flame,” “thunder,” “lightning,” “tidal wave,” “whirlpool,” or “whirlwind.”17 It is as if, through the mediation of the character Othello, a fantasy version of a “wild” African landscape is being mapped onto the bodies of actors and audience members alike, allowing supposedly “natural” forces suppressed within Europeans to “surg[e]” forth, breaking through normal “civilized” controls. Appar-ently, Othello’s perceived African-ness and his descent into “savage madness” grants Europeans an excuse to shuck their superegos and let loose with a momentary burst of emotional frenzy.18

This desire to break free from “normal” civilized controls is perhaps most clearly reflected in discussions of Italian actor Tommaso Salvini,
the most commercially successful Othello of the nineteenth century, who toured internationally in the part in productions spanning more than a decade. The fact that Salvini always spoke his lines in Italian was no hindrance to his popularity with English-speaking audiences. Quite to the contrary, they found him “emotionally perfect in expression … [H]is whole being vibrating, his face aflame.” Stanislavski and Henry James were among the many who described him as “a tiger,” George Henry Lewes compared him to “a lion,” and a Boston Globe critic called him the creator of a “whirlwind of passionate anguish.” In 1875, the Athenaeum described Salvini’s Othello as a “barbarian whose instincts, savage and passionate, are concealed behind a veneer of civilization so thick that he is himself scarcely conscious he can be other than he appears. … [T]he strife between the animal nature and the civilising influences of custom is long and sharp. In the end the barbarian triumphs.” According to many commentators, the fact that Salvini was Italian—and thus effectively perceived as hovering on the border between white and black—made him an especially good mediator of the boundary between the “civilized” and the “savage.” In Henry James’s racialized terms, Salvini provided “Anglo-Saxon” audiences with “the complete picture of passion”—what James tellingly calls a “black insanity.” As an 1884 review makes clear, what Salvini offered audiences was an escape from the bonds of a “modern” civility identified as disagreeably effete and emotionally inauthentic:

A modern Othello[,] … having done the deed, … would light a cigarette, ring for a brandy-and-soda, and tell Emilia, with a little gesture of the hand, a nod or two at the bed, and eyebrows arched with significance, to go for the police. Salvini’s Othello is unconscious of Pall Mall … It is heroic and romantic, but it is profoundly and terribly natural and true” (emphasis original).

An American who watched a performance in Rome declared, “Nothing is European in his embodiment of Othello; it is the inflammatory passion of the east bursting forth like fire.”

Such language confirms that Othello’s satisfaction for many white audiences is generated along the border between the “savage” and the “civilized,” where what is normally repressed or forbidden, assigned to the category of the other, can be deliciously reclaimed and savored, at least within the space of the theatrical performance. In that sense,
Othello’s perceived Otherness is not about his African-ness at all; it is about his ability to stand in for what Westerners perceive to be (secretly) already theirs. I think here of Mariana Torgovnick’s understanding of the tropological significance of “the primitive”: “Primitives are our untamed selves, our id forces—libidinous, irrational, violent, dangerous. ... The primitive does what we ask it to do. ... It is our ventriloquist’s dummy—or so we like to think.”  

Olivier, tellingly, believed that Othello’s fit was “a plain case of physical dysarthria, which can be brought about by overheightened emotional stress.” This “emotional stress,” writes Olivier, creates “an interruption of the connection between the brain and the speech mechanism.” In a sense, for Olivier as an actor, and for audience members looking for a chance to “shriek,” Othello answers the flip side of Gayatri Spivak’s question “Can the Subaltern Speak?” It answers the question, “Can the Dominant Self escape from speech, and let out a ‘primitive’ shout?”

In light of the importance of Othello’s “blackness” in a performance like Olivier’s, I now want to touch on a seeming anomaly in the play’s performance history. Until very recently, at least, audiences have not responded with quite the same “primitive” frenzy to seeing Othello played by actors who are actually of African descent. As I’ve said, audiences have (almost literally) gone crazy over actors who hover on the boundary between white and nonwhite: perhaps the two most popular Othellos ever were the Irish gypsy Kean and the Italian Salvini. However, audiences—at least certain kinds of audience—have been rather cooler in their emotional responses to African-American actors like Ira Aldridge, who played Othello in Europe and Russia in the nineteenth century, and Paul Robeson, who performed the role in England in 1930, and the United States in 1943–44 and 1959. To be sure, Aldridge’s and Robeson’s Othellos were great commercial successes and garnered considerable critical acclaim, and their audiences were said to applaud wildly. Positive reviews of their performances describe them as “electrifying,” and, indeed, emotionally transporting. One reviewer of a St. Petersburg performance by Aldridge reports:

The scene in the third act when the sentiment of jealousy is excited in the savage Moor, is the triumph of Aldridge; from the first moment of the cunning accusation against Desdemona, you see his eyes flash, you feel
the tears in his voice when he questions Iago, followed by stifled sobs that almost choke him, and when at last he is convinced that his misfortune is beyond doubt, a cry of anger or rather the roaring of a wild beast escapes him, coming from the very bottom of his heart. That shriek still seems to sound in my ears; it sent a thrill of horror through all the spectators. Real tears roll down his cheek, he foams at the mouth, his eyes flash fire; never have I seen an artist so completely identify himself with the person he represents. An actor told me that he saw the great tragedian sob for several minutes after he came behind the scenes. The public did not fail to be deeply touched, all wept, both men and women.26

Though many of the terms resemble those of the accounts of Olivier, Salvini, and Barry—“the roaring of a wild beast,” “eyes flash[ing] fire,” “a thrill” being sent “through all the spectators”—the emotional note here seems quieter, more “civilized,” with a greater emphasis on “sobs” than on rages: “you feel the tears in his voice,” the cry comes “from the very bottom of his heart,” “the public did not fail to be deeply touched.” This is empathy rather than libidinal frenzy, an identification with the noble man cruelly abused, not with the unleashed primitive. The kind of weeping Aldridge inspires for Othello’s “misfortune” allows Othello to emerge from the performance “identified” not with the revealed savage, but rather with “an artist,” “the great tragedian,” a man at the height of civilized attainment.27

Both positive and negative reviews of Aldridge’s Othello generally describe Aldridge’s performance as “gentleman-like,” “intellectual,” and even “chaste,”28 “subdued and pathetic rather than fiery and impulsive.”29 For some critics, this restraint and emphasis on pathos made Aldridge’s Othello the finest they had ever seen. But for others—for those critics seeking the thrills afforded by a Barry or Salvini—it was a disappointment. The Theatrical Observer, 11 April 1833, said that he “does not express the individual bursts of feeling, nor the deep and accumulating tide of passion which hurries on the noble and generous Moor to deeds of blood and death.” And the Times, of his July 1858 engagement at the Lyceum, reported that “the scenes of stormy passion are those in which he is least effective. He can be loud enough on occasion, but he never for a moment awakens the notion that any real feeling lies beneath the external violence.” The Spectator complained of his 1833 Covent Garden appearance that, while “[i]n one particular only we might expect a Na-
tive African to be better qualified by nature to personate a character of his own clime and complexion—that is, having the fiery temperament of these children of the Sun," Aldridge was in fact, in "remarkable exception to the general rule," "tame and larmoyant." Theophile Gautier, after seeing Aldridge in St. Petersburg, wrote:

We had been anticipating a vigorous style, somewhat uncontrolledly energetic, a little wild and fierce, after the manner of Kean; but the coloured tragedian, doubtless in order to appear no less cultured than the white man, acts wisely and restrainedly ... In the last scene his passions remain within bounds; he smothers Desdemona in a most gentlemanly way, and he roars most decorously ... he appeared to us to have more talent than fire, more skill than inspiration.30

In contrast to Salvini's "terribly natural," violent performance, Aldridge's, it seems, smacks a bit too much of Pall Mall.

When African-American actor Errol Hill performed the role with a regional company in 1969, he reports that he faced a similar response to his emphasis on Othello's restraint. The Boston Record American praised him as "a black Othello of uncommon dignity and marked eloquence who, in the ultimate scene rises to something like true tragic greatness."

But, in Hill's paraphrase of the review, despite this "dignity and composure," the reviewer disliked Hill's "tendency to make Othello too intellectual." Hill explains that this perception resulted from a conscious effort on my part to avoid the conventional image of the noble savage....I refused to believe Iago's slander of my wife until I had concrete proof and it was impossible to refute his allegations. When I dispatched Desdemona it was meant to be a ritual purgation of evil (the soliloquy 'it is the cause' was spoken as a prayer on my knees) except that her struggles caused me to use force.31

James Earl Jones's attempt at the role on Broadway in 1982 drew similar complaints that he was too "gentle" and "humane,"32 a complaint echoed in a lukewarm review of William Marshall's performance for Bard Productions in 1984:

William Marshall threw Othello's finale away, as had James Earl Jones in the Winter Garden Production. ... Marshall gave us the basso Othello to which Robeson conditioned us ... in the 1940s. But Marshall was more in control of verse rhythms than Robeson and brought anguish to the role as Jones had not. Marshall's was an understated performance, appropri-
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ate for TV, but at times he seemed too ‘laid-back,’ as in his unemphatic ‘Naked in bed, Iago, and not mean harm?’ He ‘peaked’ in his ‘when we shall meet at compt’ speech, which is about as late as an actor can choose to peak (Jones chose not to do so at all), but what we got was a restrained and quietly moving performance.33

The case of Paul Robeson is perhaps most revealing of all. When Robeson took the daring step of playing Othello in front of twentieth-century white English and American audiences, he insisted explicitly on the social/historical importance of race to his interpretation of the role: “I feel the play is so modern, for the problem is the problem of my own people. It is a tragedy of racial conflict.”34 In terms that initially sound like Kingsley’s, Robeson spoke of his strong identification with the part, saying,

I made myself believe I am Othello and I acted as he would act. I tried to penetrate the heart of Othello’s rage—that rage he feels is maddening, he is out of his head; and I know what this is like because I felt it once myself. One time I went out of my head in a rage and night after night, out there on the stage, I remember it.

But Robeson is not referring to an essentialist fantasy of claiming some repressed “exotic” aspect of self. According to Judith Cook, the rage he refers to is the rage of being submitted to a vicious racist attack, when “Robeson had been beaten up and had his finger-nails pulled out at the roots as a scholarship boy at Rutgers State University in 1915.”35 The selfhood being asserted here, then, is one grounded in specific, lived experience—that of being a black man in twentieth-century America—and it is the pain of that experience rather than the pleasure of Orientalism that drives his embodiment of Othello. Robeson predicted that at least some white audiences would dislike seeing him in the role, specifically because the presence of an actual black man onstage would forcibly remind audiences of the real social and historical contingencies of race relations: “[f]rom Kean on,” he said, Othello “was made a light-skinned Moor because Western Europe had made Africa a slave center, and the African was seen as a slave. English critics seeing a black Othello—like my Othello—were likely to take a colonial point of view and regard him offhand as low and ignoble.” They would prefer, he said, “to forget the ancient glory of Ethiopia.”36
As it turned out, Robeson was half right. Critics who felt disappointed by Robeson’s Othello were indeed bothered by reminders of slavery: according to the reviewer for the Spectator, “He might be the son of Uncle Tom being taught a cruel lesson by Simon Legree.” Reviewer Herbert Farjeon complained that “[t]he cares of ‘Old Man River’ were still upon him. He was a member of a subject race, still dragging the chains of his ancestors.” But the ultimate problem for most detractors wasn’t really that Robeson’s Othello was “low and ignoble.” In fact, even from those who didn’t entirely like his performance, Robeson won a great deal of praise for his “seriousness of purpose,” his “spiritual humility that is akin to grandeur,” his ability to “shoulder the whole dignity of the Negro race.” The problem, rather, was that Robeson’s Othello was just a little bit too dignified; according to various reviewers: “In the scenes of despair he crumbles up into a defeat far too domestic, gentle, and moving”; “He throws himself into the scenes of frenzy with due energy, but the savagery is not believable, the core of violence is lacking”; “He seemed to me a very depressed Othello”; and, finally, “I pitied him, but in that pity I never felt any of that wild, guilty, apocalyptic exultation at the vision of Chaos come again.”

What happened, I think, is that, for audience members seeking a “thrill” like that provided by Spranger Barry or Laurence Olivier, being reminded of the historical contingencies of slavery and racism—or simply being reminded of Africans or African-Americans themselves as real, distinct individuals—marred their pristine enjoyment of the “primitive.” As Jane Tompkins has insightfully confessed of her own childhood infatuation with “Indians,” the day when she met some actual Indians was “a disappointment”—“[m]y Indians, like my princesses, were creatures totally of the imagination, and I did not care to have any real exemplars interfering with what I already knew.” A portrayal like Robeson’s, then, simultaneously, and somewhat paradoxically, makes Othello fully a subject, but a subject who is not adequately appropriable for the imaginative use of a white audience: like Tompkins’s Indians, he remains too genuinely Other, too fully an outsider, and, as a result, the emotional barrier between actor and audience stands firm.

Terms used by Dympna Callaghan in her essay “Othello was a White Man’: Properties of Race on Shakespeare’s Stage” are also useful here.
Although she is not approaching the subject with regard to actors’ or audiences’ emotional responses to Othello, or to performances of the play in the modern period, Callaghan speaks of “the histrionic mechanisms of racial impersonation” in Shakespeare’s day, and “the striking but ineluctable discrepancy between the cultural performance of alterity on the one hand and its lived condition on the other.” She makes a crucial distinction, on early modern stages, between “the display of black people themselves (exhibition) ... and the simulation of negritude (mimesis) ...”41 A black actor like Robeson—unable as well as unwilling to provide the satisfactions of either exhibition or mimesis, and insisting on blackness as “a lived condition”—thus frustrates the hopes of audiences seeking a thrilling brush with the “civilized”/“savage” boundary.

The psychological dynamics that created disappointment for some of Aldridge’s and Robeson’s viewers may also help to explain the disappointment that haunts reviews of Laurence Fishburne’s performance in Oliver Parker’s 1995 movie version of Othello.42 The film admittedly has many inherent problems: the slight script (which hacks Shakespeare’s text in half), the MTV-inspired cinematic style, the heavy-handed use of flashback and fantasy sequences, and dialogue-garbling by some of the cast’s nonnative speakers of English. But the real problem seems to be that it failed to engage the emotions of most reviewers, who generally found it “modest,” “passionless,” and “bland.” It was called “only middling stuff ... competent and watchable but never inspiring,” a production that renders the tragedy “trivial.”43

Most reviewers found Fishburne physically imposing and believable as a warrior, and appropriately exotic: the tattoos across his shaved head led the Sunday Times to exclaim: “Here ... is a guy who could hang out with the cannibals and the anthropopagi, no problem. ... Fishburne gives back the Moor his roots.” But most ultimately found him “a lightweight Moor,” “surprisingly straightlaced,” “lack[ing] ... stature as Othello.”44 The Ottawa Citizen complained that “the passions of the character elude him. ... This Othello isn’t ripped apart, he’s sulking.” The London Independent remarked, “Fishburne is best in the early scenes, when a sort of gentle pride shines through. ... [But] later that same self-effacement diminishes the tragedy.” Literary critic Joan Lord Hall, who admires most other aspects of the film, describes Fishburne
in terms that stress his failure to escape the bounds of modern civility, of the contemporary version of Pall Mall: “he shows little more passion in asking for ‘ocular proof’ than a businessman checking with a broker on how far stock prices have fallen.”45 In contrast to the erectile language of “surging,” “swelling,” “mounting,” and “exploding” so common to enthusiastic reviews of earlier Othellos, the language reviewers attach to Fishburne suggests phallic deflation: Fishburne’s Othello is “more drooping than rousing”; it “lacks size” and “begins to dwindle”;46 the production “loses steam the closer it gets to its denouement. … [so that the] finale feels merely unfortunate, not devastating. And that’s a real tragedy.” The New York Daily News complained that “Fishburne seems eerily becalmed here, as if he were banking his energy for an explosion that never comes.”47

As anyone who has seen his Ike Turner knows, Fishburne can be “explosive” if he wants to be. But for his Othello, Fishburne made a deliberate choice not to explode. Despite a professed admiration for Olivier’s work in the role, Fishburne says that the most important thing he learned from Olivier was what not to do: “Not scream and yell.” Fishburne, like Coleman and Robeson and Kingsley and other actors before him, strongly identified with the part, saying, “I was Othello.”48 But, like Robeson’s, that identification did not hinge on a fantasy-version of the exotic. Like Robeson’s, Fishburne’s Othello calls attention to the emotional stresses of life in a racist culture—repeatedly, when the Venetians use racist language, Fishburne responds by having his Othello deliberately close his eyes and draw a calming breath. The anger he represses in the early scenes is not, then, an essential “African” violence, but the anger that arises in response to others’ devaluation of his humanity. In the temptation and murder scenes, Fishburne does not perform the slow emotional striptease, the desired crescendo from calm to unleashed fury, that so excited Barry’s and Olivier’s fans. Rather, except for brief punctuations of very efficient physical attack (he dunks Branagh’s Iago into the waves with muscle to spare, and his strangulation of Desdemona is the only version on film that looks like it would actually kill a person), there is no “extravagance of passion,” no “wildness.” In defiance of the desires of emotional voyeurs, Fishburne’s work in the film thus registers as “a strong but distant performance.”49
For an audience seeking an emotional thrill-ride, Othello must be simultaneously alien and available for identity-appropriation—he must conjure a notion of the African with "boiling blood" yet not be so genuinely distant that white audience members cannot imagine that the blood boiling is really theirs. For the pleasure of this sort of audience, Othello’s descent into savagery must be appropriable, and that means it must be universalizable. It must be possible, so to speak, to "unmoor" Othello from historical specificity—to make him, in Joan Plowright’s phrase, "absolutely valid in human terms," terms equally applicable (if not solely applicable) to white members of the audience. This universalizing impulse can be seen quite clearly in the conclusion to Marvin Rosenberg’s 1971 discussion of Othello’s performance history, *The Masks of Othello*:

All the best Othellos were praised for the wrenching torment of their see-saw battle with passion. Finally it rises nakedly, savagely from the uncensored depths of Othello’s psyche....[but] in the violence there must be a quality of heroic anguish....Swept up in a passion like Othello’s, any man might lose his 'self,' and seek refuge in a more savage, more instinctual one. The best of men might" (emphasis mine).

In Rosenberg’s view, the Venetians of the play—the “Christians” into whose company Othello wishes to assimilate—are “town men, who hire warriors” “domesticated,” “effete.” Othello is the undomesticated warrior, “touched with the strangeness and vastness of his birthplace.” And yet he is the one with whom Rosenberg wishes to identify: “To the eye, to the ear, to the heart, to the mind, he is a man apart. Yet his very apartness reflects a *kinship* with us: who has not known isolation in the midst of many? He is the authentic hero, the splendid soul that no man knows” (emphasis mine).50

And, it seems, that tricky combination of “strangeness” and “kinship” is best achieved not by a black actor, someone likely to imagine for his Othello a subjectivity formed of the particular experiences of a black man, but by an actor in what could usefully be called “racial drag.” As Herbert Farjeon stated openly, “The fact that he was a Negro did not assist [Robeson] ... Shakespeare wrote this part for a white man to play.”51 The term “racial drag” suggests itself to me as an analogy to the function of “drag” as it’s defined in David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*. According to *M. Butterfly*’s transvestite spy Song Liling, who
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has seduced an apparently heterosexual French diplomat and lived as his mistress for years, “only a man knows how a woman is supposed to act.” Because he knows men’s desires, and because he can approach femininity as pure abstraction, only a man can be “the Perfect Woman.” In other words, only a man can provide another man with a perfect fantasy vision of the feminine.52 Or, in the case of Othello, only a non-African knows how to be the perfect African, at least for the emotional fantasy-use of a thrill-seeking white audience. A real black actor, like a real woman, has too much independent selfhood getting in the way.

In Orientalism, Edward Said lists Othello among those “orientals” who have “a special role to play inside Europe,”53 used as part of the West’s effort (as I think we see in some aspects of Ben Kingsley’s account) to “domesticate” the Other for its own pleasure. For white artists and audiences, the idea of Othello also provides a corollary pleasure: the chance to “undomesticate” themselves, to liberate briefly “another self” they perceive as already part of themselves, but normally restrained by Western propriety. In other words, Othello not only has a “special role” to play inside of Europe, he has a special role to play inside of Europeans. In the performance history of Othello, then, the cultural other does not just stand in defining contrast to the white Western self, but is appropriated as a sort of emotional cultural ambassador, conducting a tantalizing passage across the border between the two. Othello, then, allows white audiences to indulge in the liberatory pleasure of the “primitive,” even at the precise moment that, applauding the great work of Shakespeare, they also celebrate one of the crowning glories of Western literary culture. To borrow Virginia Fairweather’s phrase, it is the “triumph,” in more ways than one, of “the National.”

Richmond, California

NOTES

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Virginia Mason Vaughan, Othello: A Contextual History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 120. In contrast to Barry’s and Kean’s great success, two of the century’s most accomplished actors, David Garrick and John Philip Kemble were failures in the role. Garrick, though striving for grand passion, reportedly played the part with “little wincings and gesticulations of the body,” and was “too early and too frequent” with his displays of “violence of emotion” to ignite the audience’s emotions; he resembled, according to one critic, “a little black boy, like Pompey attending with a teakettle, fretting and fuming about the stage” (Rosenberg, 42–3). Significantly, according to Kemble’s biographer, Booth, Kemble failed because he never “identified with” the role: “He was European: there seemed to be philosophy in his bearing; there was reason in his rage … One of the sublimest things in language, the professional farewell of Othello, came rather coldly from him … It was, at most, only a part very finely played” (Rosenberg, 44–5.)

Rosenberg, 62; Hankey, 56; Hankey, 58; 60; Rosenberg, 65; Hankey, 59; Rosenberg, 61; A. C. Sprague, Shakespearian Players and Performances (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 79.


Fairweather, 130–31; Olivier, 263; Fairweather, 131.

Olivier, 255–56.


Ibid., 173, 176; Edmund Kean seems to have faced a similar difficulty in containing the effects of playing Othello—in fact, ultimately, he suffered a fatal collapse in the midst of his final performance of the role (Rosenberg, 71). The collapse was prefigured by the physical and emotional toll of earlier performances, such as that described by Hazlitt in which “[h]is lips might be said less to utter words, than to bleed drops of blood gushing from his heart,” and in which he displayed “convulsed motion of the hands … [and] involuntary swellings of the veins of the forehead” (Rosenberg, 68–9). On at least one occasion, Hazlitt’s image of blood-issuing lips was literalized: a friend found Kean backstage after one performance “stretched out on a sofa, retching violently and throwing up blood. His face half washed: one side deadly pale and the other a deep copper colour” (Rosenberg, 68). The “half washed face,” half pale, half dark, may stand as a sort of emblem of the kind of psychic split Kingsley would later experience.

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3 Rosenberg, 44, 45.

4 William Cooke, biographer of the actor Charles Macklin, wrote that he “seized every imagination” and “gained entire possession of [the spectator’s] feelings”; quoted in Rosenberg, 45, and in Julie Hankey, Othello (Plays in Performance) (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1987), 43.

5 Rosenberg, 46.

6 Virginia Mason Vaughan, Othello: A Contextual History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 120. In contrast to Barry’s and Kean’s great success, two of the century’s most accomplished actors, David Garrick and John Philip Kemble were failures in the role. Garrick, though striving for grand passion, reportedly played the part with “little wincings and gesticulations of the body,” and was “too early and too frequent” with his displays of “violence of emotion” to ignite the audience’s emotions; he resembled, according to one critic, “a little black boy, like Pompey attending with a teakettle, fretting and fuming about the stage” (Rosenberg, 42–3). Significantly, according to Kemble’s biographer, Booth, Kemble failed because he never “identified with” the role: “He was European: there seemed to be philosophy in his bearing; there was reason in his rage … One of the sublimest things in language, the professional farewell of Othello, came rather coldly from him … It was, at most, only a part very finely played” (Rosenberg, 44–5.)

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14 Ibid., 173, 176; Edmund Kean seems to have faced a similar difficulty in containing the effects of playing Othello—in fact, ultimately, he suffered a fatal collapse in the midst of his final performance of the role (Rosenberg, 71). The collapse was prefigured by the physical and emotional toll of earlier performances, such as that described by Hazlitt in which “[h]is lips might be said less to utter words, than to bleed drops of blood gushing from his heart,” and in which he displayed “convulsed motion of the hands … [and] involuntary swellings of the veins of the forehead” (Rosenberg, 68–9). On at least one occasion, Hazlitt’s image of blood-issuing lips was literalized: a friend found Kean backstage after one performance “stretched out on a sofa, retching violently and throwing up blood. His face half washed: one side deadly pale and the other a deep copper colour” (Rosenberg, 68). The “half washed face,” half pale, half dark, may stand as a sort of emblem of the kind of psychic split Kingsley would later experience.
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15 Rosenberg, 40; 45; Margaret Webster, Shakespeare Without Tears (New York: Whittlesey House, 1942; rpt. Capricorn Books, 1975), 178.

16 A particularly purple passage from Kenneth Tynan, reviewing the 1947 Othello of an Eastern European actor, Frederick Valk, is a case in point, as Tynan freely mixes several of these metaphors. He writes, "I have watched a transfusion of hot bubbling blood into the invalid frame of our drama. ... I have lived for three hours on the red brink of a volcano, and the crust of lava crumbles still from my feet." He writes of Valk’s "great lion’s head," of the way he moves like a "wild bull," "bellowing," with "topless cascades" and "gulfs awash with tears opening all round him," showing the audience "Shakespeare by flashes of lightning, with a pall of heavy thunder over all"; he calls the final effect an "avalanche," and hopes Valk will continue "his angry stam-pede across other plains" (Shakespeare in the Theatre: An Anthology of Criticism, ed. Stanley Weintraub, New York: Oxford University Press, 1976; 332-336). Further examples of the same kind of boundary-repressive, typifying descriptions of Orson Welles’ perceived failure in the role: the Spectator found him "insufficiently volcanic. He does not sweep us away." The Times called him "unexciting," saying, "he smoulders purposefully, but the repression holds to the end: the expected flame never once flashes out" (Rosenberg, 148).


18 This fantasy is played out to an ultimately nightmarish extreme in George Cukor’s A Double Life (1948). In the film, a tortured Ronald Colman, playing an actor playing Othello, begins to experience Othello’s uncivilized passions in his ‘real’ life. Gradually overwhelmed by irrational sexual jealousy, Colman’s character finds himself unable to control his violent impulses for long, and he commits murder by strangulation. Audiences apparently found the character’s anguish compelling—Colman won the Oscar for Best Actor for the role.

19 Rosenberg, 111; Vaughan, 167–68; Rosenberg, 115; The ubiquity of such metaphors, however, can’t be stressed enough. Edwin Booth’s Othello, performed in the same era as Salvini’s, and considered a great rival and contrast to it (Booth was supposedly more “refined”), inspired almost identical language: a fellow actor wrote, "I was sure I saw tiger jaws shake lago, for Othello was all tiger now" (Charles H. Shattuck, Shakespeare on the American Stage: From Booth and Barrett to Soothers and Marlowe [Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1987], 42), while another reviewer described Booth, toward the end of the play, being "swept along upon a veritable tempest of passion, and he carried his auditors with him as leaves are swept by the whirlwind" (Shattuck, Shakespeare on the American Stage: From the Hallams to Edwin Booth [Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library: 1976], 141).

20 Wells, 113.


22 Rosenberg, 104; Vaughan, 165; It is important to note that even in reviews that frown on Salvini-esque histrionics, which explicitly favor a relatively restrained performance, the strongest praise is reserved for moments when the actor brushes up against the boundary between civilized restraint and wild passion. For instance, reviewer Leigh Hunt reported of Edmund Kean’s 1818 performance that he felt “suspended and heart-stricken” less by Kean’s famously extravagant displays of passion than by moments played in a subtler emotional register: "If we might venture to point out any parts the most admirable in this performance, it would be the low and agitated affectation of quiet discourse, in which he first canvasses the subject with Jago, the mild and tremulous farewell to ‘the tranquil mind, the plumed troop,’ &c. in which his voice occasionally uttered little tones of endearment, his head shook, and his
visage quivered; and thirdly, those still more awfully mild tones in which he trembles and halts. ... His louder bitterness and rage were always fine; but such passages as these, we think, were still finer. You might fancy you saw the water quivering in his eyes" (Wells, 55–6). Despite the emphasis on their "low," "quiet," "mild" quality, however, these are all clearly moments of the dilatory pleasure of hovering at the brink, of the frisson of "will he or won't he?"—as is underscored by Hunt's repeated references to agitation, tremulousness, shaking, trembling, and (twice) quivering.

23 Much admired were Salvini's modulations back and forth across the border, as he flirted with it for a while before plunging across it during the murder scene. Several reviewers praised the moment in which Salvini attacks his Iago, then relents: as Lewes describes it, he flings Iago down, "then a sudden revulsion of feeling checks the brutality of the act, the gentleman masters the animal; and with mingled remorse and disgust, he stretches forth a hand to raise him up" (Rosenberg, 111). Of course, in order to please an audience looking for a border-crossing, one needs to get the modulation right: acclaimed American actor Edwin Forrest, playing Othello in the mid-1830s, drew one reviewer's wrath for continuing to alternately vocally and physically; his late speeches, he complained the critic, "in such passages as these, Othello could no more stop the boiling of his blood to indulge such petty changes, than the path of lightning could be stopped" (Shattuck, 1976, 75).


25 Olivier, 53.


27 English and Russian reviewers of Aldridge were particularly impressed by his lack of theatricality in playing the part (in contrast, surely, to what would, in the next century, be Olivier's almost caricatural approach): "He rants less than almost any tragedian we know—he makes no vulgar appeal to the gallery"; "His qualities consist not in picturesque poses and gestures, not in a melodious singing diction, not in an artificially (pseudomajestic) tragic gait. ... He concentrates all your attention only on the inner meaning of his speech. He does not bother either about the majestic stride, but moves about completely naturally, not like a tragedian, but like a human being." (These reviews are quoted in Hill, 19–20.) The St. Petersburg correspondent for Le Nord, in an article dated December 15, 1858, wrote that "lightning flashed out of his eyes, and every fine in his face served to reflect the passions of his African soul; joy, tenderness, grief were depicted with admirable truth" (Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock, Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian, [Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1993], 228). For this reviewer, clearly, the "passions of the African soul" are not "savage" ones. When such reviewers speak of what is "natural" or "true," or when they say Aldridge displays "a deep knowledge of the human heart," they seem to be focusing on a very different aspect of the natural, and a different part of the heart and soul than those who saw the "natural" in Salvini's or Olivier's performances.

28 Dramatic Magazine, 1 July 1829, reported with pleasure that Aldridge, "though positively a Negro, is a gentleman and a man of education and could not have portrayed the character in a manner more intellectual if his face had been 'as white as unsunned snow'" (Marshall and Stock, 84). The Dublin Comet of 7 December 1831 wrote that his performance was "so chaste, so judicious and so completely Shakespearean that we doubt we shall ever again look upon the personification of Othello so entirely fulfilling all that we could imagine of the perfection of acting" (100). Saunders's New Letter, 8 December 1832, praised his performance "extremely just and pleasing in the majority of the impassioned scenes ... and marked by numberless
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touches of good taste and refinement” (108), and, in his return engangement a year later, found him “touching and energetic but chaste” (142). The Era, 2 April 1848: “Mr. Aldridge is something more than an African; he is a scholar and a gentleman; at least he acts like one” (166).

29Dublin University Magazine, 7 December 1831 (qtd. in Marshall and Stock, 103).

30 Marshall and Stock, 127; 217; 125; 230. Gautier then grudgingly admits that the St. Petersburg audience approved of this approach, and responded with “endless applause.” He muses: “A more lurid and fiercer Othello perhaps may succeed less well. After all, Othello had lived for a long time among Christians, and the lion of St. Mark must have tamed the lion of the desert” (Marshall and Stock, 230).

31 Hill, xxv.


34 Judith Cook, Shakespeare’s Players. (London: Harrap, 1983), 124. Interestingly, in a speech given in 1980, Boston theater critic Elliot Norton recalled Robeson’s 1942 Cambridge, Massachusetts debut, and noted (as Fairweather does of Olivier’s Moscow performance) “a thrill of excitement” and “pandemonium” in the primarily white audience’s response:

Nobody knew what would happen when the first black actor in American history walked on stage to play Othello, which he had every right to play ...

I remember when Paul Robeson bent down for the first time to kiss his Desdemona, there was a thrill of excitement in the theatre. No black actor, believe it or not, had ever kissed a white actress on the American stage before that time. And when Robeson, tall, handsome, with that magnificent voice, made the speech to the Ducal council, one of the greatest of all Shakespeare’s speeches, there was an enormous feeling of excitement in the theatre ...

I remember when the innocent, vulnerable Desdemona prepared for bed, that magnificent scene, the tension was enormous, and when he strangled her, it was pretty close to unbearable. At the end, there was a moment of absolute silence, unlike almost anything I’ve ever seen or heard in the theatre. And then absolute pandemonium by that first audience in Cambridge, overwhelming acceptance, an historic occasion. ... They had done something wonderful and everyone knew it and everyone rejoiced. (Hill, 126)

The “thrill” and “absolute pandemonium” here, however, are clearly generated by the performance’s status as “an historic occasion”: the proof that an African-American could triumph in one of Shakespeare’s most challenging roles, the breaking of racial barriers in the interracial kiss, combining to create an undercurrent of pride—perhaps amplified by Norton’s memory to please listeners in the relatively progressive 1980s—in scoring a triumph against “color prejudice.”

35 Cook, 125; 125.

36 Rosenberg, 195; Cook, 124.

37 Rosenberg, 153; Vaughan, 188; Rosenberg, 152–53; 152–53.

38 As Errol Hill argues, English audiences’ comparatively early willingness not only to accept but to celebrate African-American actors in the role was dependent in part on the fact that the experience of race relations was for them very different than for American whites: “The British Parliament had abolished the slave trade in 1807 and was moving inexorably toward the liberation of all slaves in countries under British rule by 1833. Aldridge’s appearance on the English stage ... was fortuitous. It provided substantial proof to the proponents of emancipation that, given the opportunity, the black man could rise from the degradation of slavery to the
highest levels of artistic expression, equal to those of the white race" (Hill, 19). Similarly, he argues that acceptance of Robeson's performance in London in 1930 depended in part on "the social security of a nation that, for all its chronic chauvinistic and horrible historical record, had no domestic color problem of its own at the time" (Hill, xiv). Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock suggest that similar cultural circumstances helped ensure the acceptance of Ira Aldridge in Ireland and Russia: Aldridge's emphasis on the injustice of racism (particularly explicit in his performances of Oronooko, Gambia, and Aaron the Moor, and Shylock) gained the sympathy of the Irish during the years leading up to the potato famine, a time of deep resentment of English hegemony (Marshall and Stock, 106–107) and of Russians in the time leading up to the emancipation of serfs (Marshall and Stock, 220–21).


40 Shelia Rose Bland's essay "How I Would Direct Othello," while it doesn't discuss any specifics of the play's performance history, provides an interesting commentary on the difficulties black actors have had with the play. She writes: "Because black actors are real people, with real human feeling, they have been striving for centuries to humanize Othello, a character who perhaps was never meant to be more than a caricature" (in Othello: New Essays by Black Writers, ed. Myrhilli Kaul [Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1997], 29-41; 3 1). Such efforts, she feels, are futile, given the racist assumptions on which the play is based. Instead, she proposes abandoning attempts to project Othello's subjectivity in favor of making the "minstrel-show" aspects of the play inescapably visible. She would accomplish this by staging the play with all white male actors in blackface. "The entire show would be played for laughs—even the murders and suicides. I would make Othello the butt of the jokes, and lago the hero—saving the values of white purity" (29). This, she says, "would amplify the racist nature of the play" in such a way as to "alienate and cause discomfort to the audience" (31).


42 Othello, Castle Rock Entertainment.


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49 Murray.

50 202–203; 197.

51 Rosenberg, 152.
