

**Moors, Mulattos, and Post-Racial Problems:  
Rethinking Racialization in Early Modern England**

by

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation, *Moors, Mulattos, and Post-Racial Problems: Rethinking Racialization in Early Modern England*, examines early modern English dramatic representations of interethnic relations between black and white figures. It focuses on those representations that both garner and elude classification as racist, and it argues that the most appropriate means of recovering the subtle modes of racialization that engender these conflicting classifications is through consideration of African American writers and thinkers.

Broadly speaking, early modern ethnicity studies have moved from exploring the period's denigratory approaches to African blackness toward identifying its counterintuitive modes of engaging such difference. This shift in criticism has brought to the fore potential sites of tolerance but fails to account for the period's contemporaneous racism. This dissertation argues that this shift has led to a critical dissonance that resembles the popular discord about the persistence or dissipation of today's racial systems. For example, early modern scholars have begun to mistakenly characterize seemingly progressive early modern phenomena like black ascendancy, interracialism, and interethnic cooperation as multicultural. Comprehensive early modern racism is obscured by such concepts of racial transcendence.

As this dissertation argues, even the problematic perspective that the early modern period might be described as multicultural offers insight. It emphasizes early modernity's difference from histories embedded in high colonialism, transatlantic slavery, and scientific racism, while rendering the period's affinities with more recent historical moments. Indeed, the early modern period exhibits a type of discursive interest in the cultural potential of practices like racial mixing

that wanes until American abolition. Such similarities comprise a bridge between the racial conceptions of the early modern period and those of post-abolition America. However, when these tolerant-seeming concepts are approached through dominant modes of analysis, they appear to contravene contemporaneous racism. African American analyses offer a more comprehensive approach. Black writers helped shift norms regarding topics like interracialism, but they concurrently explored the multivalent modes of intolerance that accompanied softened cultural prescriptions. This dissertation uses these investigations to recover the multifarious racialism that works through depictions of tolerant phenomena on the early modern stage.

This dissertation's first chapter emphasizes the silences engendered by the competing depictions of black ascendancy and overt racism in Shakespeare's *Othello*. It reads early modern English denials of slave trading along with Toni Morrison's *Desdemona* to demonstrate where *Othello* navigates and thus obscures its more insidious anti-blackness. The second chapter examines how interethnic cooperation in George Peele's *Alcazar* concurrently gives rise to a dramatic paradigm for anti-black assimilation. It turns to Zora Neale Hurston's exploration of precarious methods for broaching transracial fellowship to elucidate this paradigm. The following chapter contends that Ben Jonson's *Masque of Blackness* employs a mode of appropriation that relies on early modern England's increasing familiarity with and distaste for aspects of phenotypic African difference. It explores this mode by reading Kendrick Lamar's "The Blacker the Berry" – a song that considers how appropriative acts require an understanding of both desired and undesired aspects of black culture. The final chapter reads the sensational take on interracialism in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* alongside exceptionalizing American views of racial mixing, arguing that each approach obscures histories of the topic that conflict with dominant cultural interests. It emphasizes *Titus*'s myopia concerning interracialism by

bringing the play into conversation with underacknowledged Elizabethan records of children born to white men and enslaved black women.

## INTRODUCTION

### I.

Anti-black racism in the dramatic world of *Othello* immediately speaks to many of today's racial issues, particularly given its entangled modes of tolerance and intolerance. Shakespeare stages a world that offers a great deal of latitude to its black hero. Othello commands Venice's soldiers and defends its outposts. He holds court with Venice's senators and marries the white daughter of one such elite. Yet for nearly every rule of racism that the Moor ostensibly traverses, his actions provoke prejudices that at once seem to many to be new and atavistic. In this we might see a precursor to America's current racial predicament, where increasing social progress for black people is met with both overt and subtle mechanisms of censure and circumscription. In Shakespeare's tragedy, the malignant Iago repeatedly challenges the General's authority and competency on racial grounds, referring to Othello as "his Moorship" (1.1.32) and reminding us that "These Moors are changeable in their wills" (1.3.339-340). Given the alacrity with which Iago's criticism of a black superior both turns on and turns to the racial realm, we might be reminded of the race-based hostility that Barack Obama endured from colleagues during his terms as President of the United States. Othello and Desdemona's interracial marriage also engenders consternation, particularly from Brabantio, the bride's father, who is incredulous that his daughter would willingly choose the Moor's "sooty bosom" (1.2.71) over Venice's "curlèd darlings" (1.2.69). Yet Brabantio is also the senator who, prior to the marriage, made a habit of inviting the Moor into his home, eager to hear of Othello's exploits.

Stanley Kramer's 1967 film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* – in which the racially progressive Matt and Christina Drayton are immediately unsettled by the revelation that their daughter's fiancée is black – comes to mind as an analog, given Brabantio's hypocritical and paternalistic behavior.

As a rendering of race relations ancestral to our own, *Othello* abides a formative tenet of the English Renaissance's designation as "early modern." According to Leah S. Marcus, the label is in keeping with the field's "coming to view the period more in terms of elements repeated thereafter" with attention to "those features of the age that appear to us as precursors of our own twentieth century, the modern and the postmodern" (41). Despite this disciplinary proclivity, the above comparisons will undoubtedly appear jarring to many. This is due, in part, to a disciplinary lineage in early modern studies of shirking or contravening relationships between early modern and more modern-day ideologies of race. Such a lineage established a boundary between the ideologies of difference that preceded the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century and those that followed it. This boundary has recently begun to abate.<sup>1</sup> Its vestiges still tacitly caution that criticism of early modern ethnicity that considers more recent notions of race risks teleology, historical conflation, and anachronism. This has left the field in a contentious and, at times, woefully unproductive place. Ian Smith's recollection of his "experience sitting...directly across from [a] speaker demanding that '*Othello* is not about race'" (119) during a 2012 Shakespeare Association of America seminar session lays bare the blunt and obstructive nature of some of this contention, while Michael Neill's recent assertion concerning *Othello* plays out some of the

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<sup>1</sup> Despite the lingering effect of assertions like Gillies's, who wrote in 1994 that "'race,' 'colour' [sic], and 'prejudice'" is "anachronistic terminology" (25) in critical approaches to Shakespeare, Erickson and Hall importantly assert that such claims have lost their obstructive power. They write that the term anachronism, which was once "informally deployed as a scare tactic and conversation stopper" (4), has "run its course, and its persuasive power is now diminished" (5).

unproductive hesitancy engendered by the dispute. Neill espouses an “uneasy paradox” where “to talk about race in *Othello* is inevitably to fall into some degree of anachronism, while to ignore it is to efface something fundamental to the tragedy” (125). Neill’s stance is judicious but ultimately equivocal, leaving the field at a juncture at a moment when critical progress necessitates abandoning the belief that the historical particularity of early modern race is impenetrable and noncontiguous.

This dissertation counteracts such inhibitory notions. It reads interethnic relations between black and white subjects from Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatic texts against analogous interethnic relations from post-abolition America. In particular, it employs African American thinkers from the mid 19<sup>th</sup>-century into the present to historicize those texts’ more nuanced modes of early modern racism. As such, this dissertation finds itself in-step with the recent call to move forward, made powerfully by Peter Erickson and Kim F. Hall in their 2016 assessment of the field. Their accurate sense of the “recursiveness of early modern race studies,” characterized by “an unhealthy back-and-forth in which scholars focusing on race confront the same (already addressed) questions and pushback” (2), draws attention to a number of points of intervention that have thus far gone under-explored. Among these points, they urge “proactively tapping the connections between early modern and contemporary periods” by acknowledging that “A comprehensive study of racial configurations and iconographies requires a longer historical time line” (6). They advise “mov[ing] to a new phase where we set our own questions and chose methods that embrace strangeness, that refuse an artificial border between past and present, and that listen to the voices of people of color” (13).

In pursuing one such extended historical timeline and heeding the voices of people of color from the past and present, this dissertation proposes a method that pursues this new phase.

In some ways, its argument about such a timeline is simple: more subtle and insidious racism operates at the temporal borders of high colonialism, transatlantic slavery, and scientific racism. With its nascent but developing relationship to these overtly racist practices, Elizabethan and Jacobean racism often manifested in nuanced form. This produced the almost equivocal approach to Othello, who is rendered in a socially ascendent position but is gradually brought to ruin because of his racial difference. Nearly a century later, during the period of more intransigent racial prescriptions, it was hardly imaginable that Othello could hold his lofty position. As Thomas Rymer wonders in his 1693 review of the play, “The character of th[e Venetian] state is to employ strangers in their wars; But shall a poet thus fancy that they will set a Negro to be their General; or trust a Moor to defend them against the Turk? With us a Black-a-moor might rise to be a Trumpeter; but Shakespeare would not have him less than a Lieutenant” (91). While granting the historical Venetian practice of employing foreign mercenaries, Rymer is astounded that one could “trust” a black person in such a capacity. If Rymer’s derision is any indication — he even faults Shakespeare for “bestow[ing] a name on his Moor” (87) — Othello’s undoing would also have been a more straightforward affair if it had been envisioned at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century. As the opening comparative examples that link Obama and *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* to Shakespeare’s tragedy demonstrate, those complexities of *Othello* that lead Virginia Mason Vaughan to write “I think this play is racist, and I think it is not” (70) share more with relatively recent histories of interethnic relations. As I explicate below, the American example offers a productive point of comparison. In late 19<sup>th</sup>-century America, abolition, along with the erosion of the scientific paradigm of racism, promised black people increased social mobility.<sup>2</sup> As these more rigid technologies of black oppression began to fail, racism reorganized into even

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<sup>2</sup> For an extended examination of the erosion of the scientific paradigm in America and the African American role in this endeavor, see Baker.

more insidious processes that functioned alongside the increasing fluidity of racial prescriptions. And, in view of the longer timeline this dissertation emphasizes, the “re” in “reorganized” is key, as it signals the *return* to something akin to early modern modes.

Before rehearsing how certain “fluid” racial prescriptions from Renaissance England and post-abolition America are importantly similar, it is essential to emphasize that both periods took — and, in the case of modern-day American culture, continue to take — part in violent and overt means of anti-blackness. In the history of America after slavery, Jim Crow segregation and the widespread practice of lynching loom large as overtly violent means of black oppression. Even what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva accurately describes as today’s “‘new racism’ practices” which are “more sophisticated and subtle than those typical of the Jim Crow era” (25) are accompanied by the routine murder of black people by the police. Late 16<sup>th</sup>-century England also began to practice unequivocal anti-black violence. Elizabeth I’s most savvy proto-colonialists traded African slaves.<sup>3</sup> Among the treatment that awaited those slaves brought to England and “held in chattel bondage” was the “illicit sexual exploitation” (Habib 200) of African slavewomen, evidenced by Elizabethan records from St. Andrews Parish in Plymouth, England that show a number of mixed children born to white men.

Even in recognition of these overtly anti-black early modern practices, scholars of the period tend to agree that Elizabethan and Jacobean approaches to African difference were distinct from those of the late 17<sup>th</sup>-century. The racism that emerged alongside England’s heavy involvement in the transatlantic slave trade produced rigid paradigms of taxonomy that literally

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<sup>3</sup> Sir John Hawkins is the most notable example. I discuss his slaving voyages in further detail in this dissertation’s first chapter. Sir Francis Drake was a cousin and protégé of Hawkins’s. And Sir Walter Raleigh, who owned a young African boy name Charles (Habib 2), was also involved in mercantile activities that undoubtedly involved slaving. As Habib outlines, Robert Cecil, an investor in Raleigh’s 1603 trip to Guyana, asked Raleigh to keep the endeavor a secret due to an understanding that, in Habib’s words, their activities were “opprobrious” (70).



rendered black and white people as different species. No such overarching taxonomy governed England's late 16<sup>th</sup>- and early 17<sup>th</sup>-century approaches to African people. Ironically, scholarly disagreement about whether or not the early modern English engaged in anti-black racism hinges in large part on differing assessments of how racism operates after the early modern period. Scholars like Emily C. Bartels and Mary Floyd-Wilson, who each see the early modern period as one that was not necessarily building toward the more rigid racism of the late 17<sup>th</sup>-century, correctly argue that early modern England's approaches differed from those of the subsequent period, but they offer noticeably flattened depictions of racism after Shakespeare's time.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to Jacobean England, Bartels describes "the subsequent decades, [when] the New World would become increasingly central to England's cross-cultural plans and dreams, and the Atlantic slave trade would at once justify and be justified by an increasingly *recognizable* racism" (*Speaking* 20, emphasis mine), while Floyd-Wilson sees in early modern England an "ethnological history that failed to predict the outcome that *we now know*" (11, emphasis mine). Comparisons are being made in each of these assessments that helpfully show that early modern approaches to African difference were distinct, at least from those approaches that immediately followed. But each comparison also takes a bit too broad and simplistic a view of subsequent history. These comparisons propound that the racism that followed the early modern period is understood, familiar, and even "recognizable" and "now know[n]," perhaps because late 17<sup>th</sup>-century racism is analogous enough to our current racial prescriptions.

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<sup>4</sup> See Floyd-Wilson, 11. She cites Bartels's argument of "how experimental and disjointed England's overseas activities were, how fractured its visions and random its advances. The instance of Africa...makes us question the predictability and inevitability of the outcome – the long history of oppression that was, when viewed through what preceded, not always in the cards" (*Othello* and Africa 48).

The competing view, which tends toward seeing a complex racism operating in early modern England, espouses a different mode of comparison. It propounds deeper investigation of those subsequent iterations of racism. In the seminal *Things of Darkness*, Hall employs such a comparative view to explain how racially oppressive mechanisms in early modern England did not rely on rigid biological paradigms, arguing that “Race was then (as it is now) a social construct that is fundamentally more about power and culture than about biological difference” (6). Hall’s perspective has been furthered by a handful of critics that see in early modern England’s multiform racism something akin to more modern-day modes of racial oppression. In his *Race and Rhetoric in the Renaissance*, Smith emphasizes the applicability of Étienne Balibar’s culturalism — “a racism whose dominant theme is not biological heredity but the insurmountability of cultural differences” (Balibar and Wallterstein 21) — to complex early modern processes of exclusion. Smith astutely attunes us to the racial signification of linguistic proficiency. For Smith, the early modern use of the word “barbarian” — a common term used for Moors in Renaissance England and one that etymologically associated foreigners with linguistic difference — evinces a type of cultural prejudice directed toward African people.<sup>5</sup> In emphasizing this practice, he foregrounds exclusionary mechanisms employed against the black body but not strictly enforced through embodied difference. Such an injunction is key, particularly with regard to arguments that suggest that religion, class, or any number of facets of identity *override* race in the English Renaissance. His assertions press us to recognize what seems far more likely: embodied difference worked in concert with a panoply of factors.

Indeed, in some sense, Smith’s employment of a modern-day formulation of race to describe early modern phenomena should have broad appeal in early modern studies. It

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<sup>5</sup> Smith’s analysis includes characters like Shakespeare’s Aaron, Othello, and Caliban.

acknowledges that early modern concepts of difference were not solely focused on phenotype — a key refrain from scholars that reject the notion that there is some resemblance between early modern ideologies of difference and those of subsequent historical moments — while drawing attention to the lesser acknowledged but crucial fact that modern-day notions of difference are also not only predicated on skin color. As Vanessa Corredera explains, “skeptical critics maintain that [race’s] privileged modern construction is predominantly scientific, phenotypical, and more stable than that of the past’s” (33). A lack of discourse between early modern scholars and critical race studies enables this misconception. A formulation like Balibar’s, that tracks the transmutation of biological categories of difference into cultural ones, provides a compelling rejoinder to the mistaken belief still circulating in early modern studies that more modern-day racism necessarily abides the tenets of the scientific paradigm. Such a study demonstrates that racism persists but has found more insidious and complex modes of operation. Certainly then, acknowledging that both early modern and more modern-day notions of race are multiform enables a productive starting point.

This dissertation proceeds from the notion that racial concepts in the early modern period and the modern-day operate with similar complexity. It seeks to better understand how two historical moments — each peripheral to but extricated from the intervening moment of taxonomic racism — foster overwhelmingly oppressive conditions for people of African descent, particularly while both periods contemporaneously explore the progressive potential of a range of interethnic relations. Broaching a limited comparison between Elizabeth and Jacobean approaches to African people and England’s late 17<sup>th</sup>-century approaches — as Bartels and Floyd-Wilson do — primarily succeeds in emphasizing the relative racial tolerance of the former. Yet such a comparison does little to explain the subjugation of black people in early

modern England to servant and slave classes. Nor does it explicate why dramatic renderings of interethnicity from the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods not only fail to assimilate black people into white culture but often tend to kill off or otherwise socially inhibit black characters.<sup>6</sup>

Thorough comparative work is in many ways key to historicizing what is the mercurial and mutable process through which racist logic persists. As David Nirenberg asserts, “histories of race are best read by pre modernist and modernist alike not as prescriptive but as provocations to comparison. There is energy to be drawn from the collisions of such polemics with our own particles of history, and new elements of both past and present to be found in the wreckage” (86-87).

And indeed, there is fascinating wreckage worth examining in the comparison between early modern English concepts of race and those from post-abolition America. As stated above, one of the reasons the comparison is productive is that each period sits on opposite temporal ends of a long intervening moment of relatively intransigent racism. Bartels is right to assert that the decades that followed the Jacobean period were when “the New World would become increasingly central to England’s cross-cultural plans and dreams.” While the racism of the late 17<sup>th</sup>-century is not exactly “recognizable” to the average modern-day observer, “the Atlantic slave trade would at once justify and be justified” (Bartels) by a particular form of racism. David Theo Goldberg describes the form of racism that subtended transatlantic slavery as “naturalism,” a concept that more or less captures biological and polygenetic theses of human difference. According to Goldberg, “The naturalist conception, the claim of inherent racial inferiority, dominated from the seventeenth well into the nineteenth century” (74). But near the end of the

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<sup>6</sup> Shakespeare’s Aaron and Othello die, as does Eleazar in Thomas Dekker’s *Lust Dominion*, while George Peele details the mutilation of Muly Mahamet’s dead body at the end of *Alcazar*. Shakespeare’s Caliban and Morocco also do not fare well. Caliban is left isolated on his island, and Morocco is banned from having children.

nineteenth century, what Goldberg refers to as naturalism was gradually supplanted by a concept of racial difference he calls historicism: “historicism took hold, increasingly and increasingly assertively, as a counter-voice to naturalist racial presumptions from roughly the mid-nineteenth century on....Where naturalism underpinned the institution of slavery, historicist racial presumptions mostly fueled abolitionist movements” (202). Where naturalism touted an intransigent schema of racial hierarchy, historicism forwarded that distinct races of people were differentiated — however problematically — by their placement on a “universal” timeline of progress. Under this paradigm, African people were considered behind in development as opposed to incapable of it.<sup>7</sup> With respect to comparing early modern English concepts of race to those concepts that followed, the theories of race that gained prominence near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century did not justify enslavement. Instead, they helped encourage its abolishment. In that sense, such theories helped return the Western world to some version of the ambivalence toward African people that is characteristic of Renaissance England.

According to Goldberg, one aftereffect of this shift was that naturalist notions of race began to be understood as racist while historicist notions of race, despite their problems, were cleared of implication by comparison. According to Goldberg, there was a

deflection of charges of racism from historicist presupposition. Racism, on this account, can be predicated only on naturalist assumption. It is deemed nothing other than the (irrational) claim of inherent, immutable, and so timeless racial

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<sup>7</sup> Concerning these two approaches to race, Goldberg writes: “[Thomas] Hobbes and [James] Cook represent the logic of fixing racially conceived ‘Natives’ in a prehistorical condition of pure Being naturally incapable of developmental and so historical progress. This commitment I call *naturalism*. By contrast, [John] Locke begins another line of racially configured interpretation. This is one that explicitly and self-consciously historicizes racial characterization, elevates Europeans and their (postcolonial) progeny over primitive or undeveloped Others as a victory of History, of historical progress, even as it leaves open the possibility of those racial Others to historical development. This tradition, by contrast, I call *historicism*” (43).

(biological or moral) inferiority. Historicist racial meliorism – the claimed historical immaturity of those deemed racially undeveloped, and so admission of their developmental possibility – supposedly escapes the charge of racism by definitional deflection. (210)

As I discuss later, scholars that compare the early modern period to the historical moment of transatlantic slavery, high colonialism, and scientific racism in order to exculpate Elizabethan and Jacobean England from implication as racist enact some version of this definitional deflection. These scholars invest too heavily in the notion that intransigent models of difference are the sole conditions for racism.

Franz Boas's work in the field of anthropology pushed historicist notions even further.<sup>8</sup> According to Lee D. Baker, "During the first decade of the twentieth century Boas began to take over and centralize the leadership of his field [of anthropology]. He effectively directed the anthropology of race away from theories of evolution and guided it to a consensus that African Americans, Native Americans, and other people of color were not racially inferior and possessed unique and historically specific cultures" (100). Among Boas's assaults on prevailing Darwinist theories of race, his research made an explicit point of "distinguishing race from culture and language" (Baker 100). If early modernity is building up to scientific racism and African enslavement while post-abolition America is breaking down those paradigms and practices, we might expect the two moments to experience at least some similarity in their transitional concepts of difference. We might be reminded of Smith's research on language and culture in early modern drama, which explicates exclusionary linguistic routines in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, including its deployment against dramatic Moors, through a consideration of

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<sup>8</sup> According to Goldberg, "The change in comprehending race from biology to culture is exemplified in the work of Franz Boas in the early decades of the twentieth century" (174).

Balibar's notion of culturalist racialism. That culture and language are categories that can be pulled from the prevailing racial concepts of both Renaissance England and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century America is not especially surprising, particularly in view of a longer historical timeline of racial concepts. Indeed, as I discuss in this dissertation's Afterword, Boas's work with Zora Neale Hurston and W.E.B. Du Bois actually rehearses some of the esoteric suppositions of early modern geohumoral theory, specifically those that imagine racial mutability at the level of the individual.

Early modernity's more fluid racial paradigms enabled Elizabethan and Jacobean drama to explore issues of interethnicity that have almost progressive potential. The public theater entertained notions of black leadership in plays like *Othello*. It pondered interethnic cooperation with an African ally by staging George Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* at a crucial moment of negotiation between Elizabeth I and Moroccan leader Ahmad al-Mansur. And it explored racial mixing in plays like Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. As the Rymer example illustrates, the notion of black people leading Europeans was considered absurd just ninety years after *Othello* was first performed. Colonial practices from Rymer's era pillaged Africa rather than cooperating with it. And the taxonomic paradigm of race that gained prominence in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century propounded theories arguing that racial mixing was degenerative and unsustainable.<sup>9</sup> As these practices and beliefs waned, black ascendancy, interethnic cooperation, and racial mixing became issues of popular and academic interest again. We need only briefly touch upon the work of Boas, Hurston, and Du Bois to see that these ideas were back in circulation. Of course, the

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<sup>9</sup> Robert J. C. Young explains how these mistaken beliefs came to reinforce each other into the mid-19th-century, writing that "the claim of degeneration was thus the final, and undoubtedly the most powerful, retort to any apparent demonstration of the fertility of mixed unions. Its triumph is marked by the fact that in 1855 the fourth edition of Prichard's *Natural History of Man* was corrected...and made constant with...laws of 'decomposition' and of diminished fertility between dissimilar races" (15).

very nature of Hurston and Du Bois's work with Boas was interethnic collaboration; indeed, the German-American relied on the research and insight of the two African Americans. Du Bois co-founded the NAACP, a group expressly interested in black advancement. And along with working with Boas on paradigm shifting research, Hurston also helped anthropologist Melville Herskovits with his studies on the African American body, which examined, in part, how racial mixing shaped the African American population.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, post-abolition America was not the only place where these rigid racial paradigms eroded. Research on early modern English approaches to race would undoubtedly benefit from exploring numerous comparative points. With respect to further examining early modern England's relationship to African people, the span of the African Diaspora holds innumerable untapped examples.<sup>11</sup> In part, this dissertation almost exclusively employs the American example to broach a focused comparison. On the scale of the Diaspora, a topic like racial mixing would be too capacious to examine and subsequently marshal for any effective comparison with the literature and culture of Renaissance England. Thus, this dissertation employs specific and operative comparisons between early modern England and post-abolition America.

If we recognize some similarity between early modern concepts of race and those that followed American abolition, we might also notice a key difference. The Elizabethan and Jacobean archive is especially deficient in black voices.<sup>12</sup> Where black people are essentially absent from the discursive projects that drove toward the brutal and rigid racism that emerged

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<sup>10</sup> See Herskovits.

<sup>11</sup> Although I employ African American thinkers in particular, I do so in recognition of Gilroy's claim that "global, coalitional politics" is where "anti-imperialism and anti-racism might be seen to interact if not fuse" (4).

<sup>12</sup> As the subtitle to Habib's monograph — *Imprints of the Invisible* — attests, the position of black people in Elizabethan and Jacobean England excluded them from the era's discursive production.



near the end of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century, they are a driving force in the discourse that dismantled this project near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century. Another reason this dissertation uses the American example is that the African American archive offers a rich tradition of black thought that is especially germane to early modern issues of race. Oppressive conditions engendered a culture of black intellectual, political, and popular engagement that spoke to the abolishment of slavery and the erosion of the taxonomic paradigm. Black thinkers would subsequently break down the oppressive framework of Jim Crow segregation.

Importantly, along with undermining major conceptual pillars of black oppression, African American thinkers also articulated their subjection to new forms of racism that worked alongside increasing social tolerance. It might immediately appear odd to think of tolerance when considering, for example, 1960s America before the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Certainly, black people faced better social conditions than they had a century earlier, but we now understand that period as brutally racist. Yet in many ways the dominant culture of that time saw the early 1960s as a period of almost racial equality. Consider a frightening statistic cited by Tim Wise, who notes that in “Gallup polls taken in 1962 and 1963, between two-thirds and nearly 90 percent of whites said that blacks were treated equally with regard to jobs, schooling, and housing opportunities” (65). Given the white perspective, if black people did not have a means of articulating the complexity of their social situation, such routines of racism might still be imperceptible. And indeed, when I consider the challenge of demonstrating that Elizabethan and Jacobean England employed various forms of racism against African people, I think primarily of the period’s lack of a documented black perspective.

The lesson of Wise’s startling statistic is clear. In moments in which racism appears ambiguous and equivocal, we need theorists of race that are adept at exposing and exploring

oppressive mechanisms ranging from the subtle to the blatant. As the early modern English archive lacks any such perspective, this dissertation employs the insights of a range of black thinkers in order to explicate such mechanisms. In comparing those operative moments of affinity between Renaissance English and American approaches to blackness — where, for example, both periods exhibit similar interest in a concept like racial mixing — it examines how African American thinkers engage the more modern-day example. This dissertation then reads that analysis back onto the early modern period to historicize the English Renaissance’s complex processes of anti-blackness.

## II.

Considering a wide range of black perspectives from across history is crucial for early modern studies, particularly because scholarly investigations of race in the English Renaissance have historically focused on racial blackness. Since the inception of this line of thought in the 1960s by scholars like Eldred Jones, G.K. Hunter, and Winthrop Jordan, such investigations have also pondered the contingencies of interethnicity that occur in both literary and historical contexts. As the title of Jordan’s monograph — *White Over Black* (1968) — emphasizes, questions of hierarchy in relationships between black and white people were central from the start.<sup>13</sup> Jones’s *Othello’s Countrymen* (1965) and G.K. Hunter’s essay “Shakespeare and Color Prejudice” (1967) each considered early modern England’s circulating associations with blackness, especially those matching blackness with villainy, death, and the demonic. For Hunter, the character of Othello was a locus for Shakespeare to examine these links in metaphorical terms, while Jones’s literary analysis hinged on evidence that renderings of Moors

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<sup>13</sup> Given the scope of this project, it is notable that Jordan begins his analysis of American racism in early modern England.

drew from historical encounters between English and African people.<sup>14</sup> While both Hunter and Jones foregrounded England's penchant to consider blackness in pejorative terms, each found the ambivalent treatment of Othello as evidence that the play was meant to challenge England's essentialist notions of Moors. Important studies that followed from these investigations included Elliot Tokson's *The Popular Image of the Black Man in English Drama, 1550-1688* (1982) and Anthony Barthelemy's *Black Face, Maligned Race: The Representation of Blacks in English Drama from Shakespeare to Southerne* (1987).

The study of race was made more central — and concomitantly more nuanced — by scholarship that demonstrated the entanglements between gender and ethnicity. Ania Loomba's *Gender, Race, and Renaissance Drama* (1989), Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker's collection *Women, "Race," and Writing in the Renaissance* (1994), and Hall's *Things of Darkness* (1995) stand out as key texts that showed how multiple categories of difference worked in concert in early modern England.<sup>15</sup> Loomba's work not only brought the workings of early modernity's white patriarchal structure into clearer focus, it also employed post-colonial approaches to forge new avenues of access to Renaissance literature and culture. Hall's work also brought key innovation to the field by employing black theorists like Franz Fanon and Toni Morrison to explicate complex structures of racism. Moreover, Hall's project challenged the prevailing supposition that the tropological use of binaries of black and white — particularly in lyric that praised "dark" beauty — had no notable significance to categories of race, better enabling the field to recognize the importance of African iconography in early modern culture.

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<sup>14</sup> As Bartels writes, in 1978, Hunter was still "basing his assessments of 'color prejudice' on the assumptions that England had little firsthand knowledge of Moors" (*Speaking* 10).

<sup>15</sup> Hall and Erickson note these three texts as fundamental to the field of early modern race studies.

In the tradition of considering the interrelation of multiple identity categories, a number of subsequent projects in the field of early modern race studies made productive connections between race and religion. Again, African difference was a key point of discussion, as scholars further explored the English's use of the term "Moor" as a way to mark an Islamic person. These discussions emphasized the historical connection between the Moorish world and the Ottoman world, and they also explored the way Turkish and Moorish identity occupied overlapping conceptual space for the early modern English. Nabil Matar's important *Turks, Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery* (1999) helped inaugurate this line of inquiry by exploring an under-acknowledged history of contact between the early modern English and Islamic worlds. Daniel Vitkus's *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean* (2003) reconsidered the interethnic and interreligious contact that occurred in the early modern Mediterranean and its relationship to English theater. Vitkus's work emphasized England's understanding of itself as a belated and weak imperial power in relation to a puissant Ottoman empire. Jonathan Burton's *Traffic and Turning: Islam and English Drama, 1579-1624* (2005) also focused on England's relationship with the Islamic world and its influence on the drama of the period, but his work emphasized mercantile activity as a key point of cultural exchange.

Other projects also productively looked to a broader world to reconsider England's notions of difference. Floyd-Wilson's *English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama* (2003) undertook an expansive consideration of England's conception of a tripartite world, in which ethnicity was conceptualized by means of geohumoral principles. Other projects drew from the field's focus on England's placement in an expanding and interconnecting early modern world. Bartels's *Speaking of the Moor: From "Alcazar" to "Othello"* (2008) homed in on the English's concept of the "Moor," asserting that its indeterminacy helped make it a compelling

subject on the Renaissance stage, while Jean E. Feerick's *Strangers in Blood: Relocating Race in the Renaissance* (2010) foregrounded the importance of blood to early modern notions of race and English colonial practices.

The above scholarship from between 2000-2015 belongs to a period that Erickson and Hall importantly identify as a "mixed phase" during which "whatever is gained in overall growth through...varied explorations is accompanied by a sacrifice" (4). They note a "loss of concentrated collective energy and, in particular, a specific curtailment or abandonment of political focus" (4). As they indicate, crucial work on African difference with an overt politics on race, including some of the projects above, does emerge during this phase. Among others, Arthur Little's *Shakespeare Jungle Fever: National-imperial Re-visions of Race, Rape, and Sacrifice* (2000), Joyce Green MacDonald's *Women and Race in Early Modern Texts* (2002), and Smith's *Race and Rhetoric in the Renaissance: Barbarian Errors* (2009) conducted rigorous historical and textual analysis while keeping in mind the importance of critical conversations on race from outside early modern studies.<sup>16</sup> Other important work from this phase included Loomba and Burton's *Race in Early Modern England: A Documentary Companion* (2007), which compiled and theorized key documents on race from the period, and Imtiaz Habib's rigorously archival *Black Lives in the English Archives: Imprints of the Invisible* (2008), which definitely put to rest the misconception that there were few black people in early modern England.

As this dissertation argues, part of the reason this impressive body of research from these fifteen years failed to expand anti-racist conversations around African difference was due to the proliferation of a politics of racial transcendence in the field. Inasmuch as early modern English

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<sup>16</sup> Ayanna Thompson's *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race, and Contemporary America* (2011), which focuses on contemporary performances of Shakespeare, is another investigation from this scholarly moment with a clear racial politics.

approaches to blackness share similarities with the complex systems of racism that emerged in America after black people gained access — however limited — to social progress, they attract dominant modes of reception similar to those with which mainstream America approaches modern-day issues of race. The mode of critique that employs this politics in early modern studies is often in-step with liberal post-racialism, in that it posits that aspects of identity other than race are primary to social organization. In doing so, racism is envisioned as a surmountable obstacle.

The deployment of post-racial politics does not often coincide with active retrograde views on race; rather, post-racial views tend to arise in absence of an overt racial politics, comprising something of a reflexive and often unnoticed way of seeing race.<sup>17</sup> Feerick self-consciously “attempt[s] a different kind of project, one that departs from dominant approaches to race in resisting the temptation to limit the early modern category of race to the concept of *ethnos*” (3-4). In some sense, her project is motivated by an attempt to avoid what is the evident politics that marks anti-racist critique. Feerick argues that “if we have come to think of Othello as a member of the black race, we should consider what it means that he defines himself altogether differently as a man ‘of royal siege’ (1.2.22), a phrase that insists on lineal identification and values rank as the *dominant* social classification” (8, emphasis mine). While Feerick’s project valuably elucidates the significance of Othello’s often-stated high social position, it falls short of holding onto the preponderance of ethnic descriptors that often foreground such adjectives. Othello indeed holds a high rank, but as his repeated designation as

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<sup>17</sup> Bartels notes the influence of anti-racist politics on the field a number of times in her review of scholarship on the figure of the Moor. See Bartels, esp. 10-13. But a review of the influence of racial politics on early modern race studies is incomplete without an acknowledgement of the more pervasive politics that defines how most people, at least in America, see issues of race. See Bonilla-Silva, who argues that Color-Blind Racism and Post-Racialism are now the “dominant racial ideology” (3).

the “noble *Moor*” (2.3.122; 3.4.24; 4.1.261, emphasis mine) suggests, ethnicity is not a subordinate concern. It is one that is inextricable from other aspects of his identity. When considering Iago’s derisive identification of Othello as “his Moorship” (1.1.32) — a locution that undermines noble status through a formulation that foregrounds ethnic difference — it becomes clear that blackness remains entangled with other modes of classification such that we would be remiss to downplay its near ubiquitous pertinence.

Regardless, scholars have found various ways of downgrading the significance of Othello’s race. In another version of this “pre-racial” critique, Julia Reinhard Lupton stresses the power of religion in the period, writing that “Christian universalism, circling around the black body of the Gentile convert, has the capacity to envision if not realize a world of *racial* equality” (84).<sup>18</sup> While such analyses attempt to eschew more modern formulations of race, readings that subordinate the category of racial blackness in a play that produces the epithet “thicklips” (1.1.66) to describe its Moor are actually representative of today’s dominant politics. And indeed, the post-racial perspective is deeply pervasive, finding articulation alongside both conservative and liberal interests.<sup>19</sup>

The second intervention of this dissertation, then, is to enumerate these points where anti-racist critiques are subverted by post-racial modes of analysis. Such an intervention is especially urgent because, as I will explore in more detail in the chapters that follow, processes of early

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<sup>18</sup> Little expertly demonstrates the problems with Lupton’s argument in “Re-Historicizing Race, White Melancholia, and the Shakespearean Property.”

<sup>19</sup> Goldberg describes a version of this dual-pronged denial of racism when describing conservative colorblindness and uncritical liberal multiculturalism: “Racist states recently have sought to distribute the means and modes of their expression behind the facade of racial dispersal. Racist states have undertaken to deflect resistance by indirection. Contemporary states have sought thus to dissipate the normative power of critique in two related ways. On the one hand, they have rerouted rightful anger at the homogenizing exclusions of racist states into the circuitous ambiguities and ambivalences of ‘mere’ racially characterized, if not outright colorblind, conditions; and on the other hand, they have pursued superficial appropriation through uncritical celebration of the multicultural” (5-6).

modern racialism are similar to our own. Thus, the way we tend to see the past readily coincides with the way we tend to see the present; hermeneutics that further obfuscate already subtle processes of early modern racism perpetuate strategies of eliding the salience of race in other areas of investigation. To recognize the nuances of early modern racism requires us to reroute dominant routines of thinking. Without such a reorientation, complex early modern renderings will continue to pose what this dissertation terms “post-racial problems”: the sticking points that emerge when reputedly tolerant practices confound an accurate assessment of subtle as well as overt routines of racism.

In order to pursue more complex work on race, early modern literary studies must continue to broaden its engagement with a rich tradition of critical race scholarship. Recognition of this necessity is increasing, but we are far from a sufficient resolution. We must learn to center and rely on new perspectives — from the quotidian to the critical — rather than simply augment existing frameworks with already marginalized perspectives. A few bars from Yasiin Bey’s (né Mos Def) “Hip Hop” are helpful in explicating the fundamental value of the non-dominant view:

Native Son, speaking in the native tongue  
I got my eyes on tomorrow  
While you still tryin’ to find where it is  
I’m on the Ave where it lives and dies  
Violently, silently  
Shine so vibrantly that eyes squint to catch a glimpse  
Embrace the bass with my dark ink fingertips  
Used to speak the King’s English  
But caught a rash on my lips



So now my chat just like this.

Bey's lines disrupt the assumption that dominant conceptions are universal, and they make an appeal for using alternative language as a necessary means of moving forward. He identifies as Bigger Thomas from Richard Wright's *Native Son*, a black protagonist whose fate is determined by racist America. But Bey's aim is escaping that fate. What Bey takes from Bigger is the "native tongue," which he uses in service of looking forward and into "tomorrow." In Bey's estimation, we can only envision a better future by heeding black voices. Thus far, it is the dominant tongue — the tongue not native to the condition of blackness — that's "still tryin to find where it is." In the black register, Bey can see the very contours of this tomorrow. He's at the heart of it, on "the Ave where it lives and dies." He can recognize its vicissitudes and contradictions, its violent and silent manner of being driven in and out of possibility. What awaits is a future that shines so brightly its barely visible. But the old way of doing things — in the "King's English" — cannot bring this tomorrow into fruition. Bey catches a "rash" trying to do so; the attempt proves counterproductive and harmful to the interests of the marginalized. So he proceeds in the native tongue.

While this dissertation is not explicitly written in the vernacular, it breaks from the "King's English" in conceptual terms, most immediately by foregrounding black analyses as an appropriate mode of critique in early modern studies.<sup>20</sup> It asks new and ostensibly jarring questions of early modern culture, early modern texts, and the early modern field from the perspective that such investigations are crucial in counteracting the oversights of the dominant perspective. In "Othello's Black Handkerchief," Smith reminds us that "we are subjected to and reproduce a dominant 'white' ideology that defines what we see and how we read" (25). Indeed,

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<sup>20</sup> Gilroy identifies "the pressing need to get black cultural expressions, analyses, and histories taken seriously in academic circles" (5).

many of the nuances of interethnicity are glossed over in this tradition of reception. Thus, this dissertation makes an effort to explicate historical interethnicity from the purview of writers and thinkers that center the marginalized position.

### III.

This dissertation's first chapter, "*Othello: Pre- and Post-Racial Silences*," considers the difficulties of resolving early modern representations of black ascendancy with the period's anti-black racism. It begins with an overview of recent critical approaches to Shakespeare's *Othello*, many of which emphasize the progressive elements that enable the Moor's high social station as contrary to early modern racialism. It reads these approaches against popular and scholarly perspectives that mistakenly correlate former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell's rise with the onset of the post-racial age. The chapter then considers how other progressive-seeming stances in both the play and the early modern period further obscure anti-black practices, focusing in particular on Richard Jobson's *The Golden Trade*, a late-Jacobean travel narrative that has been noted for its less essentializing take on African people in relation to other Renaissance texts. The chapter concludes by turning to Toni Morrison's *Desdemona* – a retelling of the play that attends to many of the myriad silences surrounding *Othello*'s more subtle racism.

The following chapter, "*The Battle of Alcazar: The Multicultural Moor*," compasses the fine line between racial acceptance and assimilative multiculturalism to better historicize the tenor of early modern representations of interethnic cooperation. It focuses on George Peele's *Alcazar*, a dramatic retelling of the 1578 Moroccan battle of Ksar El-Kebir. Because the victorious Moroccan faction receives a positive depiction in Peele's text, scholars have recently argued that the play reflects England's ability to accept ethnic others. Yet an examination of

regressive modes of multiculturalism bears out the play's reliance upon assimilative procedures as a means to broker such acceptance. In contravention to its source material, *Alcazar* imbues its heroic and victorious Moors with anti-black leanings and omits reference to their phenotypic difference. Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* demonstrates the correlation between such procedures and shifting racialism, as it describes the utility of her conservative racial politics in broaching fellowship with whites during the progressive shift of the Harlem Renaissance.

This dissertation's third chapter, "*The Masque of Blackness: Washing the Ethiop Whiter than White*," considers how increasing familiarity with African difference — from facial features to hair texture — enabled the early modern English to develop nuanced modes of cultural appropriation. It argues that Ben Jonson works in such a mode in order to reconcile *Blackness*'s key problem: the masque was meant to aggrandize the country and the monarchy, but the Queen requested that her and her ladies appear as Africans, a choice that conflicted with a celebration of England. I argue that both his and Queen Anne's approach to racialized blackness mirrors more modern-day modes of appropriation, as evidenced in white youth's appropriation of hip-hop culture. Kendrick Lamar's song "The Blacker the Berry" offers a meditation on the white desire for aspects of black culture, while also examining the corollary attempt by white culture to jettison racial blackness from those desired cultural elements. I read Jonson's text with this dynamic in mind, exploring how each of the masque's major engagements with African iconography work to repudiate racial blackness in the service of Jonson's nationalistic celebration of whiteness.

The final chapter, "*Titus Andronicus: Making Much of the Mulatto*," examines how popular approaches to interracialism obscure quotidian histories, impeding evaluations of

tolerance and intolerance in historical moments of less overt racism. It glosses the post-racial perspective, which deems racial mixing a novel salve for the intransigent racism of the past but consequently elides its histories of racial and sexual violence. Early modern observers of African-English mixing – George Best, most famously – demonstrate a related approach by rendering their encounters of interracialism as atypical. Shakespeare’s *Titus* also evinces this proclivity, naming the interracial sex between Tamora and Aaron an “experiment.” While Best and Shakespeare offer sensationalized approaches to mixing, Elizabethan baptismal records show that pains were taken to hide the English parentage of mixed children born to enslaved African women. I examine the shared early modern and American history of foregrounding particular examples of racial mixing and obscuring others in order to serve the interests of the dominant culture. In doing so, I model a reading of *Titus* that shows how its attempts at exceptionalizing interracialism work to trivialize the problematic, large-scale cultural mixing between the Romans and the Goths upon which the play concludes.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Othello*: Pre- and Post-Racial Silences

In writing *Othello*, Shakespeare profoundly complicates its ostensible source, Cinthios's *Gli Hecatommithi*. This complexity is crafted through various additions, and as Coleridge famously observed, key subtractions.<sup>1</sup> Removing Iago's obvious motives, for example, develops a more mercurial and complicated villain, while concomitantly amplifying the senselessness of the final tragedy. In Cinthio's tale, there is a satisfying denouement, in which we learn that "all these events were told" by one "who knew the facts" (252). Shakespeare replaces this certitude with a panoply of engrossing loose ends. Iago, the key to better grasping the play's misfortunes, is resolutely uncommunicative once implicated. And in what reads as a final longing for the clarity denied to the play, Othello voices an intractable charge: "Speak of me as I am" (5.2.351). As the drama's lively critical afterlife demonstrates, there is a three-dimensionality to *Othello* that thwarts attempts to fully meet this request.

Because the play engages ethnic difference with similar complexity, scholars confront the arduous task of articulating the gravity of Othello's blackness. We are required to "speak of" racism as it is in the text, despite the play's intriguing indirectness with the matter. Othello is derided in the street for his blackness, yet he enjoys a relatively privileged life. He is held to prescriptive — albeit conflicting — ethnicity-based presumptions, but it is his nobility that predominates in early descriptions of him. His phenotype is an inextricable facet of his character,

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<sup>1</sup> In an annotated copy of *Othello* from which Coleridge lectured, he describes Iago's inadequate rationale for undoing the Moor as "the motive-hunting of motiveless Malignity" (Coleridge 315).

but so are his religion and his occupation. As much as the text debases Othello along ethnic lines, it also assesses him more positively through alternative criteria.<sup>2</sup>

In the first section, I demonstrate that while Othello's equivocal treatment offers some scholars avenues through which they see the play's racism contested, this type of ambiguity is actually characteristic of regimes of racial intolerance. A pervasive misconception that racialism is unambiguous often precludes an investigation of those ubiquitous systems of racism that intersect with ancillary social mechanisms and ostensibly mitigating factors. This section attempts to wrest *Othello* from readings that recapitulate this misconception. Where these notions take the form of post-racialism in the contemporary moment, early modern scholarship could be said to employ a pre-racial orientation to this complexity. While we have moved away from the full exculpatory frameworks of the recent past, the field has incorporated new models through which to selectively attribute and thus downplay the text's racism. As with many post-racial perspectives, this type of scholarship proceeds with the intention of producing conscientious work on race, appearing in-step with many anti-racist investigations of the text. To delineate how this orientation operates in approaches to *Othello*, I compare it to perspectives concerning former Secretary of State Colin Powell, a contemporary figure whose narrative also encourages doubts about the existence of racial prejudice.

In the following section, I examine how even early modern iterations of racial tolerance could elide, rather than ameliorate, the English's anti-black behavior. I focus on Richard Jobson's *The Golden Trade*, a late-Jacobean travel narrative that offers a relatively open-minded approach toward African difference. Along with presenting a less dehumanizing depiction of African people, Jobson's narrative sanctimoniously claims that the English do not trade slaves. Of course,

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<sup>2</sup> This contradictory treatment calls to mind Vaughan's response to Othello: "I think this play is racist, and I think it is not" (170).

his statement is false, but Jobson's moralistic denial demonstrates that the early modern English had the capacity to understand the ethical problems of oppressing black people. Moreover, it shows that there is often a conflict of interest between defending the dominant culture and earnestly combatting racist practices. In choosing the former over the latter, Jobson actually abets Elizabethan and Jacobean slaving.

If Jobson's cultural position predisposes him to protect English interests, even if that protection aids anti-blackness, where might we look for a viable anti-racist voice in early modern England? The following section argues that while Othello is subject to Venice's racism, he is inept at recognizing the stakes of his difference in the Venetian community. As a character written by a white author for a white audience, Othello, in Royal Shakespeare Company Actor Hugh Quarshie's words "encourage[s] the white way, or rather the wrong way, of looking at black men" (qtd. in E. Smith 47). I argue that the Moor's ignorance about his racial difference is part of the rendering that engenders silences around issues of race and racism.

In the final section, I argue that Othello's inability to speak to issues of race and racism, in conjunction with the early modern English archive's lack of a black perspective, necessitates that we look outside of the early modern period in order to better understand its history of racial intolerance. I read Toni Morrison's *Desdemona* as a play that addresses such silences. Along with rendering an Othello that meaningfully engages in a dialogue about his own identity, the play brings Barbary the maid to the stage. Where in Shakespeare's original, the African maid is only briefly mentioned, Morrison depicts a character that speaks openly to the historical circumstances of black subjugation in early modern England.<sup>3</sup> She puts these two black characters into meaningful dialogue with Desdemona, where each of them challenges the errors

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<sup>3</sup> Desdemona remembers her mother having "a maid called Barbary" (4.3.25) whose lover went mad.

of Desdemona's progressiveness. I argue that *Desdemona's* use of earnest and extended conversation to engage issues of race and racism offers an important example of why the early modern field must continue to discuss "race" explicitly rather than recapitulate to strategies that euphemize the topic. I briefly return to Powell, and focus on a 2013 interview with conservative pundit Bill O'Reilly, to demonstrate how eliminating the term "racism" from a discussion of racial intolerance disables critical engagement.

### **Othello, Colin Powell, and Post-Racial Anachronisms**

Because *Othello* provides such a nuanced rendering of ethnic difference, it is particularly susceptible to pre-racial readings. Consider the bluntness of Cinthio's ensign on the matter of race. When the Moorish Commander entreats him for an honest answer concerning Desdemona's affections, the ensign's fabrication rings simple: "The woman has come to dislike your blackness" (245). The revelation, which strikes "the Moor's heart to its core" (245), employs an ostensibly unambiguous prejudice about skin color. Compare this moment to its Shakespearean analog, where Iago's words embed the phenotypic concern within a collection of factors:

to be bold with you,  
Not to affect many proposèd matches  
Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,  
Whereto we see in all things nature tends.  
Foh, one may smell in such a will most rank,  
Foul disproportions, thoughts unnatural! (3.3.233-238)

Racial prejudice is not an independent concern here, given the inclusion of "degree" and "climate." Instead, Iago intersperses notions of skin color and humoral tenets with vague notions



of status. Elsewhere in the play, perhaps most infamously through Iago's description of Othello as an "old black ram" (1.1.88), age provides another compounding facet to the Moor's characterization.

To elucidate this multileveled approach to Othello's identity, critics often contrast the play's treatment of Othello with subsequent racial ideologies. In these comparisons, later ideologies of ethnicity are sometimes posed as more comprehensible than early modern notions of difference. In Mary Floyd-Wilson's illuminating monograph on geohumoralism, for example, we are told that focusing on the "accession of white over black" overlooks climatological theories of difference, "an ethnological history that failed to predict the outcome that *we now know*" (11). Because the shared understanding of typical "white over black" racism now preoccupies our gaze, importing such knowledge is considered an impediment to appreciating the distinct nuances of early modern ethnic ideology.<sup>4</sup>

This perspective, though, relies upon the assumption that proper racialism is more or less a unidimensional and definitive matter. And certainly, Floyd-Wilson's assertion raises an important concern: scholars in early modern studies may not "know" very much about the less overt ways in which racism operates in subsequent moments, and thus it may not be able to recognize similar subtleties at work in early modern ideologies of difference. Scholars of American race relations point to a more insidious and vastly less conspicuous system than is commonly understood in discussions of racism in early modern scholarship. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva writes that "'new racism' practices have emerged that are more sophisticated and subtle than those typical of the Jim Crow era" (25). And as mystifying as contemporary racism appears, Gallup poll data cited by Tim Wise demonstrates that even the Jim Crow system failed to

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<sup>4</sup> For a similar argument, see Feerick, 3-9.

indicate the country's structural and pervasive inequality to most white Americans at the time.<sup>5</sup> Insomuch as scholars in early modern studies adhere to a reductive conception of race-based intolerance, how might they accurately categorize what does and what does not comprise racism in a text as nuanced as *Othello*?

Today, the subtleties that complicate strict "white over black" prejudice provide fodder for post-racial perspectives. The intersection of ethnicity with factors such as class, culture, and geography offer alternative points through which to articulate social inequality. According to Lawrence Bobo, this perspective propounds that "black complaints and grievances about inequality and discrimination are well-worn tales, at least passé if not now pointedly false assessments of the main challenges facing blacks in a world largely free of the dismal burdens of overt racial division and oppression" (13). Although to some this might seem an utterly harsh position, it pervades mainstream culture in multivalent iterations.<sup>6</sup>

Liberal post-racialism is germane to pre-racial trends in early modern scholarship in that it over-privileges progressive phenomena as indicating the disappearance of racism. Thus, an event such as the 2008 election of Barack Obama as President of the United States represents a deeply desired improvement in America's race relations. As Emily Bartels attests to doing in her thoughtful *Speaking of the Moor*, a propensity in early modern race studies to "err on the side of wanting early modern drama and culture to be more radical, more liberal than it finally was" (19) enacts an analogous view of *Othello*'s subtleties.<sup>7</sup> Details that appear to conflict with a

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<sup>5</sup> Wise notes that in "Gallup polls taken in 1962 and 1963, between two-thirds and nearly 90 percent of whites said that blacks were treated equally with regard to jobs, schooling, and housing opportunities" (65).

<sup>6</sup> Bonilla-Silva argues that Color-Blind Racism and Post-Racialism are now the "dominant racial ideology" (3).

<sup>7</sup> Wise argues that liberal post-racialism is particularly detrimental to progressive color-consciousness. He sees this ideology as an essential component to Obama's first campaign for the presidency. See Wise, esp. 63-140.

straightforward xenophobia — such as Othello’s high social rank — are marshaled to indicate a telling progressiveness. Early modernity’s prejudicial concerns are steered away from the matter of color and are instead articulated through accompanying issues: among them, class, climate, and religion. As such, Shakespeare’s England appears to garner a capacity to accept people of color in a way that is lost to our own culture, and Othello’s ethnicity seems a peripheral concern in the drama’s larger context.

The figure of Colin Powell provides an apt contemporary analog that brings these procedures into relief. Although Powell and Othello are disparate figures in many obvious senses, they share an important similarity in that they are frequently invoked to gauge the racial climate of their respective societies. Because both are renowned for their military service, both are members to overwhelmingly white communities, and both belong to an elevated social class, they also engender pre- and post-racial arguments. As such, rhetoric that collects around Powell offers a particularly informative avenue of inquiry into critical approaches to Shakespeare’s Moor.

*Othello*, of course, begins with multiple examples of overt racism. Roderigo stoops to calling the Moor “thick-lips” (1.1.66) before Iago correlates Othello’s blackness with the “devil” (1.1.91), a “ram” (1.1.88), and a “Barbary horse” (1.1.113). As the play unfolds, these types of exclamations are more or less relegated to the fringe. Yet looking at the Powell example demonstrates that such extreme rhetoric often overshadows complex systems of racism instead of exposing them. Take an instance of clear prejudicial rhetoric aimed at the former Secretary of State — Rush Limbaugh’s criticism of Powell’s endorsement of Barack Obama: “Melanin is thicker than water.” For Limbaugh, this puerile witticism explains Powell’s vote for the Democratic Presidential candidate simply as a function of unthinking black solidarity. Not unlike

Iago's slandering one of Venice's most noble residents, the ostensibly shocking facet of the attack is its targeting of one of the Republican Party's most distinguished members: Powell, who, for many, embodies the promise of a post-racial America. In a study of the former Secretary of State's potential for further political success, Donald R. Kinder and Corrine M. McConaughy assert that in 1996, there was "no connection between racism and ratings of Powell among whites" (162). They conclude that "Powell is immune to racial stereotyping and racial identification" (163). Given this perspective, Limbaugh's attack might immediately be described as atypical, and his vociferous brand of racism might be contextualized as aberrant and unrepresentative of any mainstream perspective.

But as Limbaugh's rhetoric demonstrates, Powell is not "immune" to racial stereotyping. Equally untenable is the suggestion that such vulgarity exists independent of a range of like-mindedness. It would be naive to assume that Limbaugh's argument did not sum up — in however offensive a guise — many Americans' thoughts on Powell's endorsement of another black man. The notion itself is neither surprising nor unconvincing, despite its clearly racialized reasoning. While the language that Brabantio attributes to the "profane wretch" (1.1.116) is the penchant of the Limbaughs and the Iagos, its dearth in the mainstream parlance does not correlate with the absence of racism.<sup>8</sup> Focusing on Limbaugh obscures the less vociferous iterations of racialized thought that inexorably circulate in the mainstream, and it precludes an investigation of our own pedestrian prejudices. Certainly, the field of early modern studies has recognized that the vituperative rhetoric of Iago and Roderigo is not the play's sole iteration of racism, heeding Peter Erickson's assertion that "Iago's group is not an isolated aberration in an

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<sup>8</sup> Take Obama's comments on racism after a white supremacist killed nine black people at the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina on June 17, 2015. He points out that "it's not just a matter of it not being polite to say nigger in public. That's not the measure of whether racism still exists or not. It's not just a matter of overt discrimination."

otherwise unprejudiced white society” (137). But some critics have yet to attend to Erickson’s corollary injunction that “a better working model [for approaching *Othello*] is to assume a more nuanced model of crude versus subtle versions of prejudice along a spectrum of white views” (“Images” 137), insomuch as this mode of approach asks that we investigate the “problems with the ‘positive’ side represented by characters like the Duke and Desdemona.

Such a notion has a clear tie to liberal aspirations. Relegating racism to the realm of the vociferous and the unambiguous reflects a culture with insubstantial prejudice. But, as innocuous of an outlook as this might seem, Bonilla-Silva warns that it “produce[s] a rosy picture of race relations that misses what is going on on the ground” (5). Pointing out gestures of tolerance within regimes of pervasive and subtle racism is an entirely different enterprise than seeking only overt racism in purportedly tolerant societies. The latter tends to enforce the idea that racism is a bogeyman and not a viable concern.

Powell’s journey through America’s changing racial landscape — from being confronted with the realities of the Jim Crow South in the early 60s to being appointed Secretary of State — enforces the belief iterated by Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom that his race is now “irrelevant” (544). Powell’s ascent signals a profound softening of the racist sentiments that are most readily associated with pre-Civil Rights Movement America. Yet the inherent tokenization that such a perspective enacts is seen by others as a mechanism of modern racism: because of their high visibility and co-optations by both liberal and conservative agendas, Powell’s atypical successes act as a cover for the enduring social struggle of a large portion of America’s black population.<sup>9</sup> In conjunction with overshadowing the challenges facing black people in lower social classes, Powell’s high status also refutes the multivalent racism to which he is subjected. If we focus only

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<sup>9</sup> See Lusane, esp. 59-63.

on socially ascendant black figures, tolerance and inclusivity appears abundant and racism appears trivial.

Attention to these post-racial blindspots reframes Othello's position and the liberties that are apparently afforded to him in Venice. In the first Act, these freedoms protect Othello from the play's then worst-case scenario: the extent of Brabantio's official influence. Iago warns Othello that Brabantio "will divorce you, / Or put upon you what restraint or grievance / The law, with all his might to enforce it on, / Will give him cable" (1.2.14-17). The government's capitulation to this would undoubtedly read as xenophobic. Only unambiguous prejudice would lead the senate to endorse Brabantio's unsubstantiated accusation that Othello's legitimate marriage results from "witchcraft" (1.3.64). Of course, the play does not promote Brabantio's point of view. But as the text makes clear, it is nothing of note to refute these particular prejudices. In the Duke's words, they are the "thin habits and poor likelihoods / Of modern seeming" (1.2.108-109). As such, the Senate is quite prepared to disregard them.

At the core of Brabantio's complaints are all too familiar invocations of anti-black prejudice. If Othello's ascendant social positioning signals a full transcendence of familiar racist opinions, the senator would embrace his daughter's marriage to such a notable Venetian, rather than instinctively demean it along phenotypic lines. But the senator's conclusion that Othello has bewitched his daughter rests in an understanding that Desdemona's shunning of "the wealthy curled darlings of our nation" (1.2.69) makes her choosing Othello's "sooty bosom" (1.2.71) otherwise inconceivable. The inherent valuation of white over black requires no deeper justification in the text; its reasoning is salient enough to warrant the investigation at hand.

It is essential to note, as critics like Erickson have, that the Duke's ameliorative rejoinder to Brabantio that his son-in-law is "far more fair than black" only reinforces the hierarchical

system of prejudices that subtend Brabantio's racist assessment. Michael Neill loses sight of this in his rigorous introduction to the Oxford edition of the tragedy. He sees the Duke as an accepting figure, considering the "far more fair than black" riposte as expressly drawn from "theological traditions, founded in the Song of Songs, and bolstered by the legends of Balthasar, Prester John, and the black St Maurice, that allowed for a positive image of black people" (127-128). To be sure, Neill's overview takes the problems of downplaying Othello's difference quite seriously.<sup>10</sup> But it is important to recognize that as Neill emphasizes the Duke's approval of the Moor, he does so against a notably flat standard for racial inequality, asserting that "for Shakespeare and his contemporaries, the relationship between ethnicity and subordination was by no means clear; and Iago's continuing hints that there is something recognizably unnatural about the vesting of authority in the Moor are seemingly annulled by the Duke's public show of respect" (124). Neill is correct to characterize the early modern relationship between race and subordination as incoherent, but we must begin to consider this fact a low bar for assessing a culture's capacity to accept ethnic difference. As the Powell example demonstrates, black ascendancy presents a convincing but misleading counter to claims of multivalent racism. And thus, in view of Othello's endorsed position of authority, we may be apt to overstate the positive, non-racial parameters of his supporter's sentiments such that their racialized aspects are rendered moot. Certainly, the Duke appears resolved to intervene positively on Othello's behalf, but he does so in a way that, in Kim Hall's accurate estimation, "operate[s] on an assumption that nobility or virtue is opposed to black skin" (Hall, "*Othello*" 368). The failure of the senator's request for punishment does not evince early modernity's capacity for tolerance so much as it distracts from the racist rationale that subtends such a request: clemency in the face of

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<sup>10</sup> In his review of scholarship on *Othello*, Neill is rightly critical of "liberal bardolatry" (121) and "comforting conclusions about the play" (121).

Brabantio's intolerance defers rather than undoes the prejudices that privilege the "curlèd darlings" over "such a thing as" Othello (1.2.72).

To call the entire interaction racist, however, might seem too simple. Given the historicist's injunction to particularize, obviating such predictable labels is encouraged. Indeed, Brabantio's worries of witchcraft are distinct from Iago's animalizing anti-blackness. Emilia's angry claim at the play's conclusion that Othello is a "blacker devil" (5.2.140) notably deviates from the Duke's diplomatic downplaying of the Moor's ethnic difference. A panoply of factors are at play in these myriad approaches to blackness, and homogenizing these moments certainly hinders an exploration of their distinct nuances. Inasmuch as racism seems like a master narrative — a totalizing representation of past and present interethnic relations — its ostensible simplicity appears to many to be a tedious refrain, one that discourages interpretive methods aimed at offering more comprehensive and polyvocal accounts.

Yet such a stance is only viable if we approach racism in flattened terms. Because the pre- and post-racial perspective sees a simplicity in racism that rarely manifests in the inherent complexity that accompanies interethnic relations, racial prejudice is rarely assessed as the intricate matter that it is. Historical particularization that is enacted through this gaze flattens and thus avoids a matter that would otherwise be seen as fundamental. The ideological dominance of post-racialism normalizes this circumvention. It is paramount to recognize that, even as historians and literary scholars, we are influenced by a culture that perennially avoids the fraught complications of acknowledging comprehensive racism. When scholarly modes capitulate to such a tendency, we must investigate this bias and its impact on our work.

There is something of Linda Hutcheon's notion of the postmodern at work in scholarship that seeks to undo the "totalizing impulse" (63) that is often associated with seeing early modern



culture as racist. Hutcheon's conception of the "postmodern paradox of anti-totalizing totalization" is helpful here, as it hazards that undoing one historical narrative of continuity enacts its own installation of teleological closure (Hutcheon 63). In early modern ethnicity studies, where race and racism present a narrative that needs to be troubled, the pre-racial perspective offers precisely this corollary totalization. Its own proposed trajectory maps onto the post-racial narrative. The fallacy of both is that they neatly distinguish particular periods — broadly speaking, post-1960s America and pre-eighteenth-century England — from the racism that is almost universally understood to occupy the centuries between them. This trajectory proposes a sharp and untenable break, one in which racism suddenly appears, persists for centuries, and then just as rapidly disappears. Instead of broadening critical avenues into early modern ethnic ideology, such a narrative insulates the period against any continuities that might exceed this neat boundary.

One way of seeing the untenability of these fractures is by comparing the startling similarities that exist between approaches to Othello's blackness and approaches to Colin Powell's blackness. These critical parallels demonstrate compatibilities between the early modern period and the contemporary moment. Take Kinder and McConnaghy's measure of Powell. They note that Powell "is of Jamaican heritage. He is light-skinned. He keeps company with white people. He speaks... 'like a white person.' And perhaps not least, he is a victorious General" (163). The former Secretary of State's ethnic ancestry, phenotype, relationship to and visible placement within a white social group, way of speaking, and military service enable America's capacity to essentialize him. A cursory examination of fairly recent investigations of ethnicity in *Othello* indicate analagous avenues of inquiry.

Emily Bartels's *Speaking of the Moor* provides a thorough exploration of the ethnic parameters of the term "Moor." She attempts to distinguish early modern dramatic representations of Moors from the critical perspectives that affiliate them with "the specter of New World slavery and its legacy of prejudice" (12). This move informs her close reading of the play, in which Othello's lofty social station — the play's "proposing and endorsing him as a representative of the Venetian state" (171) — demonstrates an uncoded membership to his community and enables an "interactive process that knows no cultural bounds" (180). The incisive distinctions that Bartels draws are valuable, but the argument maps onto the post-racial paradigm in many ways. Her take on Othello's position and the social mobility it affords him signals racial transcendence in a manner not unlike the common approach to Powell's occupation. The gesture to a historically distant era of more perceptible prejudice also drives this point: critiques that foreground *Othello's* temporal distance from England's prolific slaving find their analog in arguments that emphasize Powell's (and by extension America's) emergence from the Jim Crow era. To hone in on Othello's Moorish — as opposed to his West African — heritage asserts another detachment from transatlantic slavery, particularly one that is akin to emphasizing the former Secretary of State's Jamaican ancestry and its genealogical disconnectedness to American racism. Bartels's analysis certainly provides vital considerations for more thorough historicization of the Othello figure, but when put in the service of demonstrating Othello's ability to interact with his community in a way that "knows no cultural bounds," it serves to depict too idealistic a culture and too neat of a fracture from the racism that both preceded and followed the dominance of transatlantic slave trading.

That is not to say that the avenues of assessment employed by Kinder and McConnaughy to evaluate Powell cannot be used to examine Othello in ways that resist or even contest pre-

racial logic. Indeed, investigations that consider the complexity of contemporary racial constructions – and the affinities between analyzing contemporary and early modern constructions through such complexity – stand to work through these continuities in ways that avoid extricating or excusing the tragedy from its otherwise salient racialism. Jonathan Burton's *Traffic and Turning* considers Othello's creation within an early modern England that, through its cultural and commercial exchange with the Islamic world, was rife with contested stereotypes concerning African people. Burton notes "Othello's abandonment of one racial system that privileges him as 'noble Othello,' 'Valiant Othello,' or 'our noble General' for another that understands him as a 'dull Moor,' 'blacker devil,' or 'base Indian'" (251), offering us something of the model through which Powell is deemed immune to racial identification because he adheres to culturally preferable qualities and thus "deviates so markedly from the prototype"(163). Yet while Burton's project is interested in demonstrating "laudatory" representations of Moors, it resists "idealiz[ing] the cross-cultural encounters of the early modern period" by way of an attention to the flattened, aspirational notions of racialism that beset assessments of both early modern and contemporary shows of tolerance, specifically the fundamentally pre- and post-racial pitfalls engendered by the term "multiculturalism" (12)<sup>11</sup>. In doing so, Burton's approach keeps in mind that Othello's relationship to Venice, not unlike Powell's relationship to America, relies upon a set of racially specific preconditions.

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<sup>11</sup> Crucially, Burton's project does not maintain strict boundaries between early modern and contemporary constructions of difference, asserting that "The ways in which we imagine or construct difference today depend in part upon past notions of difference that remain sedimented in present structures and which continue to inform our assumptions or systems of understanding" (12). He thereby remains attuned to "complex and protracted histories." His hesitance to utilize the modern-day, exculpatory notion of multiculturalism, with its "implication that differences among various groups are respected and valued as positive or desirable rather than negative or threatening," demonstrates an essential engagement with the complexity of modern-day frameworks (12).

With its awareness of complex racist modes developed, in part, by an close attention to contemporary constructions, Ian Smith's *Race and Rhetoric in the Renaissance* considers Othello's way of speaking – his opportunity to “enact a performance of cultural whiteness” (134), an avenue akin to Kinder and McConaughy's assertion that Powell speaks like a white person – in ways that contest pre-racial logic.<sup>12</sup> By focusing on language as a marker of ethnic difference, his project historicizes a viable, ostensibly counterintuitive avenue of assessing early modern ideologies of race; however, it does so without instating broad exculpatory boundaries between his area of focus and the evident procedures of early modern English racism. Instead, Smith proceeds from a robust consideration of racism's operation through ancillary social mechanisms, employing Etienne Balibar's focus on the cultural parameters of racialism – a theory, it is essential to note, with specific purchase for the complexity of contemporary neo-racist modes – to elucidate how racial differences code when biological conceptions are not culturally salient.<sup>13</sup>

My intention in distilling the above projects in relation to a contemporary example is not intended to evacuate or undermine their historical rigor, nor is it to suggest that a thorough historicization of early modern culture is unattainable. Instead, it is to demonstrate that discussing early modern interethnic relations finds important affinities with discussing today's racial concerns. The framework with which Powell's complex racial identity is situated in relation to contemporary racism echoes the scholarly modes that are used to assess Othello and

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<sup>12</sup> For Smith, “displacing race and Africa from the terrain of sixteenth-century studies...reinforce[s] the narrow triangulation of Africa, slavery, and color as historically later, primary *topoi* for race in our collective academic and cultural consciousness” (*Race and Rhetoric* 11). By contrast, Smith remains wary of even the oversimplified notion of race as solely color-based, contending that it enables a “color blindness...that effectively obscures and minimizes the importance of other strategies of racialization” (*Race and Rhetoric* 10).

<sup>13</sup> See Smith, *Race and Rhetoric*, 133-134. See also Balibar and Wallerstein, 17-27.

the interethnic climate of early modernity. Even those projects that seek to divorce early modern racial ideology from subsequent perceptions of ethnicity traffic in contemporary procedures and thus exhibit a relationship to today's sociopolitical issues. These modes of analysis only appear extricated from contemporary racial concerns under the auspices of a bounded early modern racialism. While, according to Leah S. Marcus, the field has come to "view the period more in terms of elements repeated thereafter" with attention to "those features of the age that appear to us as precursors of our own twentieth century, the modern and the postmodern" (41), notable portions of early modern studies still fall short of embracing these links when it applies to matters of race.

Kim Hall explains the importance of maintaining a dialogue between early modern scholarship and contemporary racial concerns: "Imposing absolute boundaries between early modern and contemporary constructions may allow us not to think about race either in Renaissance texts or in our classrooms. More specifically, it serves to maintain white privilege in Renaissance studies, the luxury of *not* thinking about race — hence duplicating racism in writing and professional relations" (*Things* 255). This now-two-decades-old caution delineates unfavorable implications for a field that is not in meaningful dialogue with today's issues of race and racism. Not only does such an unfamiliarity inhibit an interdisciplinary dialogue with a rich tradition of critical race scholarship, it also restricts us from analyzing our own normalized predilections. While these boundaries have softened in many ways, they have not yet mitigated to such an extent that the field has thoroughly reckoned with the persistence of its normalized biases or the deleterious effect such biases have on antiracist critique.

On the contrary, imagining an early modern field that is devoid of such biases enacts mechanisms of the post-racial. With such an aspirational stance, dominant, normalized biases

invariably go unrecognized. And as a result, they persist. Emma Smith elucidates this cycle with respect to *Othello* when she argues that “racism is ‘institutional’ in *Othello*...it is and has been a foundational tenet of its writing and its ongoing reception, an enabling condition of its creation and reproduction” (17). E. Smith’s accurate assessment of the ways in which the play’s “ongoing reception” perpetuates its racism urges close attention to contemporary scholarly proclivities.

### **Progressive Elisions**

It is not only important that we interrogate the early modern field’s proclivity to downplay the effect of racism because the period produced particularly subtle modes of anti-blackness. It is also essential to do so because the period engendered surprising moments of tolerance. As I demonstrate in this section, tolerant approaches to blackness sometimes redouble the silences around racist behavior, especially when progressive white people fail to implicate other white people for pursuing racist lines of thought. When enacting meaningful change requires one to implicate the dominant culture to which they belong, loyalty to that group often takes precedence.

*Othello* offers some version of this when Desdemona defends her husband against the prevailing belief that Moors are inherently jealous. “My noble Moor,” she argues, “Is true of mind, and made of no such baseness / As jealous creatures are” (3.4.24-26). Desdemona’s assertion contradicts Venice’s racism. That she turns out to be wrong, and that *Othello* does devolve into a state of uncontrollable jealousy, reaffirms that Moors are “made of...such baseness.” It is notable that the play circulates such a view, if only to demonstrate that the early modern English had a capacity for less essentializing takes on African people. But a tolerant stance like Desdemona’s has little impact on the racism that circulates in Shakespeare’s Venice,

specifically because it fails to actually implicate the racists around her. Her argument disagrees with one pejorative viewpoint, but it fails to question the mode of thinking that produces such an opinion. It is perhaps unfair to expect Desdemona to mount such a challenge. As discussed in the previous section, dominant culture in the modern-day is generally unsuccessful at even identifying day-to-day racism. Certainly, if we generally fail at challenging quotidian anti-blackness, how might we expect Shakespeare to imagine an anti-racist voice? However, in both the early modern period and the modern-day, a failure to challenge the cultural systems that perpetuate racism only engenders further silence around the issue.

This ability for progressiveness to elide a society's racist proclivities is demonstrated by Richard Jobson's late-Jacobean travel narrative, *The Golden Trade*. Jobson is perhaps best known for introducing Europe to the game of Mancala. He made his trip down the River Gambia in 1620 and published his account in 1623. The explorer documented his journey in order to disseminate information concerning what he asserted were riches from the "inward parts of *Affrica*" (3). For Jobson, it was incumbent upon the English to pursue this trade to further their national interests. Unsurprisingly, his narrative takes a keen interest in describing the multiethnic assortment of people he encounters on his journey.

His narrative begins with the story of a group of English travelers that are "betrayde" by "a few poore dejected *Portingals* and *Molatos*" (6). In what becomes a theme for Jobson, his accounting of the events offers a chance to highlight desirable qualities in the English. According to him, the group that are betrayed are preyed upon due to "the overmuch trust of [their] English hearts" (6). Concerning his own honesty, Jobson reminds the reader that his narrative is derived from reputable sources, writing:

what doeth insewe of this discourse; is written from mee either as an eye  
witness, or what I have received from the Country people, and none but such, as  
were of esteeme, and as my confidence assures, would deliver no false thing, as  
where I come to speak of blacke people in particular, may be more aptly  
conceived. (9)

The uncertain syntax of Jobson's emphasis on "blacke people" makes possible at least two readings. First, Jobson may hint at the conflicting and often erroneous information the English had about Africans living in their native homeland. His assurances regarding his sources are intended to verify that the ethnographic information that he provides about Africans — "where [he] come[s] to speak of blacke people" — is accurate.<sup>14</sup>

The other possible (and more likely) meaning of the reference to black people belies an English belief in African untrustworthiness. Considering the multiethnic dealings of the explorer, this latter conclusion is certainly plausible: the "blacke people" he "speak[s]" of are his sources of information. Alongside Jobson's patently early modern English suggestion that "in particular" black people's veracity requires a white guarantor is the fact that the explorer takes the time to entrust "confidence" into his African informants. Jobson's trust in his interlocutors exemplifies a more generous early modern English view of black people, but underlying his confidence is the fact that such a guarantee is necessary for his readership. Where, in a sense, Jobson offers a Desdemona-like faith in non-whites in this moment, the faction of his readership that requires the passage's qualifier represents the more common perspective of a character like Emilia.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Amid the proto-ethnographic information, Jobson reinforces the stereotype that black men have large penises. See Friedman, 103. See also Morgan, 29.

<sup>15</sup> See Jones. Concerning Emilia, he writes: "She is a woman of the world, quick to apply her popular wisdom to her experiences. She is sceptical [sic] of Desdemona's confidence in the constance of Othello's nature" (92).



As already noted, Jobson's narrative is particularly invested in the prospect of English advancement. In recounting his journey, the explorer writes with the hope that his account "may first tend, unto the advancement of God's glory, and next undoubtedly the honor, wealth, and preferment of our owne nation" (2). With its proto-nationalist aspirations, Jobson's narrative finds itself firmly within the scope of the well-known *Principal Navigations*, a collection that carried the ancillary ambition to promote England as a nation with the capacity for great international success.<sup>16</sup> Yet, this proto-nationalist mode, in conjunction with Jobson's tolerant stance on black people, calls into question the veracity of his claims about the interrelationship between England and sub-Saharan Africa. For Jobson, Africa holds only material riches available for commerce, and the suggestion that England would sully itself with slave-trading is a point that he not only denies but denounces. Concerning his encounter with an African slaver, he writes:

hee shewed unto mee, certaine young blacke women, who were standing by themselves, and had white strings crosse their bodies, which hee told me were slaves, brought for me to buy, I made answer, We were a people, who did not deale in any such commodities, neither did wee buy or sell one another, or any that had our owne shapes; he seemed to marvell much at it, and told us, it was the only marchandize, they carried downe into the countrey, where they fetch all their salt, and that they were solde there to white men, who earnestly desired them, especially such young women, as hee had brought for us: we answered, They were another kinde of people different from us. (112)

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<sup>16</sup> Jobson writes that he is encouraged to publish his narrative by Samuel Purchas, the man who oversaw the publishing of many of Hakluyt's manuscripts after Hakluyt's death. See Jobson, 1.

The response is palpably moralistic, presenting England as a nation comprised of more righteous people than those “different from us,” presumably the Portuguese and the Spanish. Unlike the other “white men,” who “earnestly desired...such young women,” Jobson — being an Englishman — wants nothing to do with trading slaves, particularly when the slaves in question are also made to appear as objects of sexual desire.<sup>17</sup> His ability to refuse the purchase of the young women causes the seller to “marvell.”

Such posturing begs suspicion, especially since England did “deale in...such commodities.” While there is no record of Jobson being involved in slaving, the explorer set sail from Dartmouth, only thirty miles from Plymouth, the launch-point for England’s first documented slaving operation. Moreover, he might have read about John Hawkins, England’s first slaver, in *Principal Navigations*.<sup>18</sup> Jobson would also have likely at least seen black slaves in one of the English port towns or in London. Given his interest in trade and exploration, it would indeed be odd if he had not heard stories about the African slaves that resided in England.

Jobson’s outright denial of England’s slaving in favor of a more wishful ideal works to hide a key feature of his culture’s anti-blackness. And as with liberal post-racialism in the modern-day, such a stance actually abets openly racist behavior. In his thoroughly researched *Black Lives in the English Archive*, Imtiaz Habib points out that there “are two obvious reasons why the English in the late Tudor and Stuart periods would be less than forthcoming about their African voyages and their products” (69). The first is that a Papal Bull guaranteed the Portuguese a monopoly on slave trading, a decree that would have been dangerous to openly contravene

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<sup>17</sup> As I discuss in this dissertation’s final chapter, the early modern English also implicated continental European men for engaging in interracial sex, while, at the same time, they sought to hide their own participation in interracial relationships.

<sup>18</sup> Jobson notes Purchas’s continuing Hakluyt’s work as a compiler of England’s proto-colonial and exploratory activity, calling him “so diligent a searcher, and setter forth of all our English travailes” (1).

given early modern England's uncertain military prowess. The second, according to Habib, is "the political awkwardness...of a Protestant England advertising its own involvement in one of the very evils for which it publicly criticized Catholic Europe, namely slavery" (69). With his moralistic tone, Jobson ostensibly abides by the second reason. Yet, in doing so, his account actually further enables England's pillaging of Africa, by hiding actual English activities behind a screen of disavowal. Indeed, English merchants that dabbled in the trade of goods and people from African sought to hide their practices because, like Jobson, they were aware of the ethical problems of their actions. According to Habib, "even by the end of Elizabeth's reign that such voyages in general are regarded as opprobrious activities by the involved parties themselves is directly illuminated in Robert Cecil's instruction to Walter Raleigh when he invested in the latter's trip to Guyana in 1603, 'as much as be, to conceal our adventure'" (70).

None of this is not to say that Jobson was anti-black. On the contrary, what P.E.H. Hair describes as Jobson's "liberal minded approach" (61) demonstrates that early modern English attitudes toward black people could vary.<sup>19</sup> However, when unexamined, Jobson's account takes on a mystique akin to that of the Colin Powell narrative.<sup>20</sup> The lessons of post-racialism demonstrate that well-meaning, progressive approaches often aid racist behavior by attempting to conceal or excuse it. Moreover, both progressive and bigoted agendas often work in ways that place primacy on the celebration of the dominant culture and the maintenance of its normative routines. To Jobson, England was a nation of great people. So to protect that belief, the traveler was conveniently ignorant about the nation's involvement in the slave trade. Proto-colonialists like Raleigh and Cecil were also interested in England's advancement. For them, such

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<sup>19</sup> For a reading that situates Jobson's narrative in less tolerant terms, see Morgan, especially 28-29. She writes that Jobson's "narrative, even at its most laudatory, always rested on the inferiority of African peoples" (28). Morgan provides a thorough reading of Jobson's approach to African women.

<sup>20</sup> Hair utilizes Jobson to exculpate English culture.

advancement required participation in “opprobrious activities.” Yet to protect England from an incursion from the Portuguese or to protect it from moral repudiation, the pair sought to “conceal” Raleigh’s voyage to Guyana and Cecil’s investment in it.

Even while Cecil’s injunction and Jobson’s letter each attempt to downplay England’s more repugnant designs on Africa, they move from different positions. Cecil financially supported Raleigh’s mercantile activities, which often attempted to mirror the practices of the Spanish and Portuguese in the trafficking of African slaves. By contrast, Jobson advocated for a model of trading with Africa that rejected the prospect of dealing in human beings. It is tempting to consider these differing perspectives as representative of a culture with nascent and thus incoherent stances on African difference. But, as I argue earlier, such an interpretation presumes that racist cultures are clear and consistent in their approach. By attempting to undo one teleological narrative — that some version of racism is more or less a cultural constant throughout human history — such an interpretation asserts its own untenable order of events, one in which racism has a more or less clear start and end point.

White over black ideology is an almost atavistic impulse in the white Western world, one that has been informed, reformed, attenuated, and exacerbated by various sociocultural conditions. It has taken on different modes of operation specific to the historic moment, but it has not yet failed to emerge on some level in sustained interethnic contact. Unless one can point to some utopian moment where African difference was accepted entirely by a white culture, specifically where blackness was not recognized and mobilized in any meaningful way, one must rely on the overwhelming evidence that such difference reliably enabled iniquity. And in the English and American context, the iniquity fostered by difference serves white interests. The guiding principle of Shankar Raman’s *Renaissance Literatures and Postcolonial Studies* is

helpful here. His monograph proceeds from two interrelated notions: “we have always been postcolonial; we shall never be fully postcolonial” (1). For Raman, we have always been “postcolonial” in the sense that our current understanding of colonial activity “make[s] visible structures of power, categories of thought and patterns of behavior that extend beyond their early modern manifestation. The suggestion that we have always been postcolonial thus takes its impetus from a recognition of continuities and inheritances, permeating spaces and times that might at first glance seem divergent, discrete” (1). In that vein, we will also never be entirely “postcolonial.” As Raman explains: “European colonialism no longer functions as it used to, but nonetheless its consequences endure, mutating and surviving; the world has been re-shaped irreversibly” (2). Raman’s paradigm offers another way of thinking about the term “post-racial.” Inasmuch as those “categories of thought and patterns of behavior” that subtend racist practices have emerged throughout history at points of interethnic contact, humanity has always been “post-racial”: it has always come after a moment of racial recognition. The trajectory of human culture has been drastically and irreversibly altered because of this history. As such, we will never be in a moment that has not on some level been shaped by a past moment influenced by issues of race and racism. We will never be “post-racial.”

Given the fallacies of the argument that racism emerged only after the early modern period, it should not be surprising that Renaissance England was home to egregious anti-blackness. In contradistinction to Jobson’s claims that the English did not “buy or sell...any that had our owne shapes” (112), John Hawkins’s slave trading was underwritten by the country’s sovereign. Elizabeth I aided Hawkins’s 1564 and 1567 slaving voyages by lending him the *Jesus of Lubeck*, a 700-ton vessel from her own collection, to head his group of ships. The Queen’s

support was augmented by that of around 30 known London investors.<sup>21</sup> Hawkins trafficked at least 1000 Africans under the English flag, demonstrating that the potential for profit superseded the moral conflict so plainly voiced by Jobson.<sup>22</sup> As evidenced by Hawkins's chosen coat of arms, which includes the image of an African bound by a rope, the slaver took pride in the precise nature of his mercantile activities.<sup>23</sup>

While we can point to Hawkins's actions as flagrantly racist, it would be a significant stretch to call to Jobson's approach anti-racist. At best, Jobson's view is aspirational. But what is at stake is that it further enables anti-black practices. To apply Bonilla-Silva's description of post-racial ideology, Jobson's narrative "produce[s] a rosy picture of race relations that misses what is going on on the ground" (5). Of course, the "rosy picture" that Jobson is most concerned with presenting is of his native England. And this is the central problem. Jobson speaks as a proud member of his English culture, and thus he is motivated to protect that culture over and above the interests of those Africans that were seized and enslaved by his countrymen.

Such a problematic progressiveness persists even into the eighteenth century — the period of more intransigent racism. Take Captain George Berkeley's 1756 account of Hawkins's role in the history of England's mercantile endeavors. With curious sympathy for all parties involved, he writes:

The inventors of things are rarely chargeable with all those faults which attend them afterwards in the prosecution: nor are we in the present case to stigmatize the name of *Hawkins*, as the man who taught us to trade in one another's liberty;

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<sup>21</sup> See Kelsey, 53.

<sup>22</sup> Kelsey's research identifies that between 300-500 Africans were seized in each of Hawkins' journeys: 1562, 1564, and 1567. See Kelsey, 15, 24, and 69.

<sup>23</sup> See Kelsey, 32

or to reduce the human species to what is little above the condition of brutes  
(290).

Berkeley's attempt at exculpation belies a deep understanding of the ethical vacancy of slavery. That this perspective is published at the height of England's transatlantic activity, and almost a half-century before any sincerely impactful abolitionist legislation, complicates the prevalent notion that Shakespeare's England was home to a racial acceptance that was lost on the nation in the following century. On the contrary, a neat trajectory of England's historically escalating racist views collapses back on itself, as Berkeley's moralistic "trade in one another's liberty" harkens backwards nearly a century to Jobson's "neither did we buy or sell one another" (112). Berkeley's sentiments stand as a keen reminder that no historical moment can reliably produce a homogenizing view of black people or a quintessential racism. Racism is instead marked by its multiple modes of operation. And as the Berkeley and Jobson accounts exemplify, racism can counterintuitively operate even through attempts at tolerance.

As is case with Jobson's narrative, the problems with Berkeley's tolerance can be linked to its defense of English culture. Berkeley is keen to address both Hawkins and Queen Elizabeth's early role in the triangular trade. Elizabeth, he writes with no extant historical referent or citation, had a "fear of carrying away the African Negroes without their free consent," an act "which she declared would be detestable and would call down the vengeance of heaven upon the undertakers" (292). Hawkins's journey is also significantly sanitized. According to Berkeley, Hawkins endeavored to "invite" the Africans "into the better Climate, and more fruitful Country of the West Indies" (290-291). Berkeley's excusatory tenor, the transparency of which is conspicuous to the modern-day reader, is contingent upon an apprehension of slavery's immorality. Yet, Berkeley's unsophisticated relocation of blame away from Elizabeth and

Hawkins clearly demonstrates that the former captain would rather protect the legacy of English people long dead than take a productive stand against obvious injustice. What might be considered a more palatable perspective concerning slavery, especially given the period from which it is produced, concurrently serves to elide the unimaginable oppression experienced by those Africans trafficked by Hawkins.

To consider the scope of early modernity's racialist proclivities, those approaches to African difference that appear progressive and ostensibly opposed to overt and intransigent anti-blackness must be interrogated. Berkeley and Jobson's progressively minded criticisms of slavery — while not explicitly racist in themselves — contribute to the cultural silences surrounding Elizabethan and Jacobean prejudice. In doing so, they aid mechanisms of anti-blackness.

### **The “White Way”**

In the last section, I argued that Berkeley and Jobson enabled slave-trading through their progressive stances, in part, because they were proud members of an English culture that saw itself as distinct from African culture. It is perhaps for this reason that we should not expect them to have been anti-racist advocates. Their cultural positions predisposed them to protect the interests of their countrymen in favor of directly confronting the suffering of foreigners. As my analysis of the post-racial perspective demonstrates, such biases are a fixture of culture. Black and white people tend to see issues of race in demonstrably different terms.<sup>24</sup> It is for this reason that fields like early modern studies must continue to diversify.

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<sup>24</sup> For a cogent example of such biases circulate today and inflect scholarship on the early modern period, see Smith, “We are Othello,” esp. 113-118. There, Smith importantly articulates the starkly different perspectives of black and white people in America with respect to police violence.



Consider Dave Chappelle’s “Racial Draft” sketch, which appeared during the second season of the iconic *Chappelle’s Show*. As comedic commentary drawn up from the collaboration between its white and black writing team, it expertly rehearses central problems of Colin Powell’s relationship to white and black America.<sup>25</sup> In the sketch, racial delegations gather to lay exclusive claim to a handful of prominent mixed race people.<sup>26</sup> What begins as a farcical play on the mistaken notion that mixed race people can choose or be chosen by any ethnic group to which they belong becomes more absurd once the delegations attempt to draft people to racial groups to which they do not identify. As a signal of this shift, the white delegation attempts to draft Powell. The request demonstrates the former Secretary of State’s cooptation by white-centric communities, a move that exemplifies Michelle Elam’s reading of the sketch as commentary on the notion that “whites are the experts, blacks and people of color the object of their expertise” (165). But before Powell can be traded, the former Secretary of State’s “whiteness” is placed “under review.” The moment of resistance, in which the commentators reiterate that Powell is “100% black,” articulates Powell’s membership — however contested — to the black community, a point that is lost on the white delegation. Powell is ultimately traded away in a deal that also places the African American Condoleezza Rice in the “white race,” but the deal is not completed until the black delegation attempts an equally absurd trade by asking for Eminem as part of the agreement. The representative for the white race objects to trading away Eminem, emphasizing that white people set the terms for inclusion into and exclusion from the dominant sphere.

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<sup>25</sup> Chappelle is black and his co-writer, Neal Brennan, is white.

<sup>26</sup> The Black delegation drafts Tiger Woods, for example, while the Jewish delegation drafts Lenny Kravitz.

White people dictate entirely the racial dynamic in *Othello*. Both the world of the play and the culture from which it is produced lack a viable black perspective to even challenge the terms set for the Moor. Where Dave Chapelle comments on the double-standard imposed on Colin Powell, and Powell himself speaks to the significance of his ethnicity to his social and political identity, Othello is woefully inept in his racial conceptions.<sup>27</sup> Instead, it is most prominently Iago who brings racial consciousness — in a particularly destructive form — to bear on Venice. Consider again Iago’s take on interracial relationships. The ensign is keen to advocate a familiar early modern cultural aversion toward racial mixing, as he wonders aloud that one might recognize in Desdemona “a will most rank” because she failed to “affect many proposed matches / Of her own clime, complexion, and degree.” His subsequent speech is strategically ingratiating in its advocacy for intraracial relationships:

But pardon me; I do not in position  
Distinctly speak of her; though I may fear  
Her will, recoiling to her better judgment,  
May fall to match you with her country forms  
And happily repent. (3.3.237-243)

Despite Iago’s striking claim that with “better judgement” Desdemona might “happily repent,” Othello demonstrates himself incapable of meaningfully pursuing the conversation. Left alone to consider Iago’s argument and the reasons Desdemona may have strayed, Othello manages only to wonder: “Haply, for I am black / And have not those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have” (3.3.267-269). The qualifier “haply” reduces the issue of race — a concern

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<sup>27</sup> As I discuss in the following section, Powell’s interview with Bill O’Reilly provides an example of the former Secretary of State’s studied understanding of the manifold effects of his ethnicity in the public sphere. On more than one occasion during the interview, he distinguishes between perspectives as an American and his perspectives as a black American.

evident to so many others in Venice's white community — to a hypothetical. Indeed, of all the directions to which Iago leads Othello “by the nose” (1.3.383), the path to realizing the consequence of his and Desdemona's racial difference is not one of them.

Othello is, in fact, one of the least racially conscious characters in the play, despite being rendered with the ethnic identity most poised to speak to Venice's prejudicial drive. In some sense, his silence enables the play's lack of a constructively progressive perspective, tacitly authorizing his blackness to be co-opted, just as Powell's is in Chappelle's imaginary scenario. Instead, other characters craft narratives with and around Othello's blackness, as Habib's analysis maintains:

[Desdemona's] Othello is the completely re-written subaltern subject, the ‘Ethiop’ proverbially ‘washed white.’ Iago's ‘old black ram’ (1.1.88) is the puissant alien bestiality underlying civil society's servile pretensions that he identifies with but cannot, from within his metropolitan positioning, directly invoke. The subalternist Othello subject is, in other words, the blank that Venice's nationhood needs to complete itself. (*Shakespeare and Race* 137)

Habib describes a particular process of dominant culture, in which black figures, like Othello and Powell, are available for white-washing because they adapt and are adaptable to the society's dominant “pretensions.” It is, as Habib argues, the “possession of the other that makes possible the possessor's self-fantasy” (*Shakespeare and Race* 136). Othello's inability to articulate his own subject position, in turn, enables the Venetians' competing and fantastical approaches to his blackness.

It is essential to acknowledge that unlike Powell, who has the volition to speak to his racial position, Othello is a fictive creation of the white mind produced for white consumption.

This often-forgotten fact is cogently explained by Royal Shakespeare Company actor Hugh Quarshie. In referencing his hesitation to play the character, Quarshie wonders: “when a black actor plays a role written for a white actor in black make-up and for a predominantly white audience, does he not encourage the white way, or rather the wrong way, of looking at black men?” (qtd. in E. Smith 47) Quarshie’s question reiterates Habib’s characterization of Othello as a “blank.” The Moor is not an advocate for black concerns, but rather a repository for white figurations. Unlike *Merchant’s* Shylock, who cogently articulates Venice’s anti-Semitism in his well-known “Hath not a Jew eyes” speech, or *Othello’s* own Emilia, who compellingly expresses the double-standard faced by women who act on extra-marital desire (4.3.82-101), Othello’s perspective on his own blackness is denigratory, as his reference to his “begrimed and black” face (3.3.392) expresses.<sup>28</sup> This self-description also communicates the limitation of racial perspective inherent to his rendering: his “begrimed and black” face references the makeup worn in order to make a white actor appear as a Moorish character. On the early modern stage, at least, Othello’s blackness was materially superficial.

As such, Othello is ill-equipped to confront the assumptions and aspersions that are directed at racial blackness. His gestation in blackface produces a figure that is subjected to essentializing perspectives but unable to respond to them. Othello is especially available for pre- and post-racial figurations because he does not speak to Venice’s racial intolerance. He is, in fact, an ideal candidate for such figurations because he is effectively ignorant of racial concerns.

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<sup>28</sup> In the following chapter, I examine the necessity for black characters to be anti-black in order to gain acceptance.

## Deferring Racial Transcendence

If *Othello* engenders pre- and post-racial silences, Toni Morrison's *Desdemona* — a collaboration with Rokya Traoré and Peter Sellers — works to fill some of its key gaps. Described by Erickson as a “re-vision” that is “grounded in close reading of Shakespeare’s play” (*Late 1*), Morrison’s drama stages crucial conversations between the text’s most maligned characters.<sup>29</sup> In doing so, it gives necessary context to the conditions of race and gender that go unaddressed in Shakespeare’s original. As is evident by its title, *Desdemona*’s explorations are driven by Othello’s wife, who resides in a type of purgatory. In her words, she “exist[s] in between, now: between life on Earth and life beyond it; between all time, which has no beginning and no end” (14). There, she engages in conversations with other characters that are dead by the conclusion of the original play, Othello among them. According to Morrison, she was motivated to pursue the adaptation, in part, because of Shakespeare’s limited exposition of Desdemona’s initial boldness — her “downright violence and storm of fortunes” (1.3.248).<sup>30</sup> For example, she takes Desdemona’s acquiescent death and renarrates it such that the character appears defiant even in the act of being murdered. In her discussion with Othello after death, she tells the Moor: “You were not killing me, you were killing Othello. The man I believed you to be was lost to me” (50).

Where Desdemona is rewritten to better represent the disobedience she initially expresses in *Othello*, the Moor is reimagined as a character capable of challenging others’ circumscribing perspectives of him. His response to Desdemona confronts his function as a “blank” (Habib,

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<sup>29</sup> To accurately describe the work that Morrison is doing with *Desdemona*, Erickson cites Adrienne Rich’s definition of revision: “We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us” (Rich 35).

<sup>30</sup> In an interview with François Noudelmann, Morrison notes that Desdemona “likes the stories [Othello] tells her about his life and so I thought she really has an adventuresome mind, she wants to get away. She’s not obedient. And so I took it from there” (41).

*Shakespeare* 137) in the original play. He requests that Desdemona: “Tell me about this Othello you believed me to be” (50). Her response is problematically colorblind. She tells Othello that she believed he “was more than the rapture of his body; more than the sword at his side” (51). Her mitigation of Othello’s embodied qualities prompts the Moor to confront the implications of her colorblindness. His response to Desdemona is combative, confronting the self-serving aspects of his wife’s untenable aspirations: “My rage was toward your delusion,” he asserts, “your requirements for a bleached, ultra-civilized soul framed in blood, for court manners honed by violence” (51).

Desdemona’s colorblind “delusion” becomes an explicit point of discussion in the exchange between her and her maid. Where in the original, Desdemona only references her mother having “a maid called Barbary” (4.3.25), Morrison’s play brings this maid to the stage. In doing so, she revises the Shakespearean trope of the silent, off-stage black woman.<sup>31</sup> Rather than reuse the generic moniker “Barbary,” Morrison renames the character Sa’ran. In Morrison’s rendition, Desdemona warmly greets her maid in the “in between,” calling her “Barbary” (45) and reminiscing about how she and the maid “shared so much” (45). Sa’ran’s response strikes the core of Desdemona’s fantasies. She challenges the intimacy of their relationship by pointing out that Desdemona does not even know her name. “Barbary” (45)? Sa’ran asks. “Barbary is what you call Africa. Barbary is the geography of the foreigner, the savage” (45). In response to Desdemona’s claim that the pair shared a great deal, Sa’ran responds: “we shared nothing” (45). The maid’s assertion hinges on their racial difference. She reminds Desdemona: “I am black-skinned. You are white-skinned” (45).

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<sup>31</sup> See Hall, who importantly explores the significance of the “unheard, unnamed, and unseen (at least by critics) black woman” (89) in *The Merchant of Venice*, whom Lancelot is accused of impregnating.

Sa'ran concurrently brings attention to the historical conditions in early modern England that most likely informed her inception as an African maid. In contrast to Desdemona's belief that Sa'ran was her "best friend" (45), the maid protests: "I was your slave" (45). The notion that a prominent woman like Desdemona would own a slave would have indeed been available for Shakespeare. Peter Fryer reminds us that "towards the end of the sixteenth century it was beginning to be the smart thing for titled and propertied families in England to have a black slave or two among the household servants" (9). This was indeed the case for the wife of Sir Walter Raleigh, who, according to Fryer, was "one of the first to acquire such an exotic status symbol" (9).

Along with making explicit many of the sociohistorical conditions in Shakespeare's Venice that circumscribe — and, in the case of Desdemona's maid, marginalize — black people, Morrison also thinks deeply about the perpetuity of anti-black systems in the Western world. Rather than stage a racial reconciliation in the seemingly eternal "in between," Morrison renders the transracial discussion interminable. When Othello wonders if it's "too late" for their love, Desdemona supplants his focus on terminus with the possibility of their new position. "'Late'" she informs her husband, "has no meaning here. Here there is only the possibility for wisdom" (55). Again we can note that human culture is always post-racial in the sense that is always coming after some preceding moment of racial recognition. And human culture will never be post-racial because any future moment has been irrevocably shaped by a history driven, in part, by the violence of racialization. In order to envision a true reconciliation between Othello and Desdemona — one in which race no longer matters to either them or to the world around them — Morrison removes the couple from this trajectory, placing them in what Desdemona deems the "privileged position in timelessness" (56). Taking our cue from the play, we might say that,

unlike Morrison's Othello and Desdemona, early modern scholars are not in this privileged position, but it is nonetheless incumbent upon us to pursue earnest conversations about race. We investigate a period with racist practices that are nuanced enough to, at times, appear inconsequential, and we do so from a moment that is prone to downplaying the importance of race, even in instances where its influence is apparent.

A thorough analysis of early modern England's myriad ideologies of race, thus, goes hand-in-hand with a rigorous assessment of the present concerns that inform today's critics as they interpret the past. Ian Smith gestures towards just such an under-acknowledged concern at the conclusion of "Othello's Black Handkerchief." After troubling widespread assumptions that Othello's handkerchief is white, Smith wonders "whether this inveterate predisposition to see only a white handkerchief functions as an index to inherited critical frameworks that continue to circulate and shape the work of reading and producing knowledge in the field of early modern studies" (25). Reiterating Toni Morrison's argument from *Playing in the Dark*, he reminds us that "as readers we are subjected to and reproduce a dominant 'white' ideology that defines what we see and how we read" (25). Smith's suggestions about reading practices raise a deeply important issue to the field of early modern studies, one that in his estimation has enabled pervasive assumptions about the color of one of *Othello's* most notable material objects.

In a thoughtful and cogent response to Smith's general argument, Michael Neill emphasizes Smith's ability to demonstrate the handkerchief's "status as an object of conjecture" (29). According to Neill, as an item that is referred to in the play as a "trifle" but one that both exacerbates and signals the extent of Othello's jealous condition, the handkerchief serves to "trap the audience into habits of speculation that painfully mirror those of the protagonist" (30). Neill's response appears more of a commentary on the speculation engendered by the handkerchief,



which is a tradition that Smith's article furthers. Absent from Neill's response is any direct engagement with the dominant reading practices which Smith contends have contributed to this tradition of reception and conjecture.<sup>32</sup> Although myriad reasons might exist for this omission, the absence, in a sense, recapitulates and extends Smith's argument: this reading practice is so normalized that it garners — even in direct response — no real consideration with respect to the early modern field's analytic procedures. To Neill's point, the sheer amount of interest that is gathered by the handkerchief is inversely related to its significance as an object. Unlike the handkerchief, however, the deeply vital role which today's perceptions play in early modern race studies — especially those often unrecognized, dominant modes of analysis — receives a startlingly small amount of attention. Such pervasive modes of analysis are inexorably entangled with contemporary sociopolitical matters. If these dominant modes remain under-acknowledged and unexamined by early modern studies, they too will continue to seem like matters of mere “conjecture.”

The operation of these modes is far from a moot point. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva writes that “the task of analysts interested in studying racial structures is to uncover the particular social, economic, political, social control, and ideological mechanisms responsible for the reproduction of racial privilege in a society” (9). This injunction indicates the multivalent channels through which racism operates. Scholars of race and ethnicity are required to determine if and how these various mechanisms buttress racism in our objects of study. However, if we cannot first determine how these multivalent mechanisms intertwine with racism today, how can we properly

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<sup>32</sup> If there is any nod to Smith's urgent contentions about dominant reading practice in Neill's response, it appears in a sentence concerning Thomas Rymer's 1692 assessment of the play: “But however much his judgement may have been clouded (like most of ours) by the prejudices of his own time, Rymer was by no means imperceptive” (26).

assess race and racism in the past? Moreover, if we cannot account for these contemporary systems, how can we take into consideration their operation in our scholarship?

The reproduction of these modes relies upon us doubting the impact of “a dominant ‘white’ ideology” on our work. To acknowledge racism’s attachment to the broader mechanisms of society is to recognize the ubiquity of racism. Thus, in order to maintain the status quo, these connections are severed in the dominant consciousness. The various mechanisms through which racism perpetuates are rearticulated as concerns independent of ethnicity, and what remains is an emphasis only on quintessential racism. But in so much as we only search for an unadulterated racism — one that is extricable from accompanying factors — our pursuit is destined to turn up empty.

Powell’s attempts at demonstrating what he described as the “vein of intolerance within the [Republican] party” fell prey to just such a process. The former Secretary of State came under scrutiny by Bill O’Reilly for suggesting that particular remarks made against Barack Obama during the 2012 Presidential election were racially insensitive. O’Reilly honed in on Powell’s censure of the word “lazy,” as it was used by Republican John Sununu to describe President Obama. The television pundit balked at the notion that the term sent a “code.” He accused Powell of “making a racial issue” out of phrasing that “wouldn’t matter if [Obama] was white, purple, or green.” Instead, O’Reilly defended the language as politically partisan, arguing that it occurred “in the heat of a campaign.”

Rather than recognize any correlation between the term “lazy” and a history of black stereotypes, O’Reilly capitalized on the term’s non-racial applications. He deemphasized the importance of Obama’s blackness, and he honed in on the political parameters under which the word was used. He then took racism off the table entirely by pushing Powell to repeatedly assert

that Sununu was “not a racist.” Powell, who refused to cast aspersions on his Republican constituents, was left with no other way to show that the term reflected the party’s “intolerance.” The immediacy of the concern predictably waned. O’Reilly suggested that Powell simply refer to the remarks as a “foolish” decision, and Powell, in turn, agreed that they were “poorly chosen.” Ultimately, Powell’s example failed to demonstrate quintessential prejudice, and by that measure, racial intolerance was nowhere to be found.

In *Othello*’s final scene, there is something of a prompt to consider the network of intricacies that spur the debate over the existence of racism in the play. There, the Moor justifies his decision to kill Desdemona in especially insufficient terms. Approaching her bedside before the tragic climax, he utters: “It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul. / Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars. / It is the cause” (5.2.1-3). Unbeknownst to Othello, his justification is based on Iago’s carefully crafted fiction. But the Moor’s inability to articulate his reasoning does not simply signal the hero’s ignorance. The repetition of the vacant “cause” circles a set of circumstances that even the audience cannot fully parse.

We might see in this “cause” a strong connection to racism. Chiefly, there is Iago’s penchant for racialized invective, which presents itself as either a premise or a product of his desire to undo the General. Contingently, though, there is also the ensign’s capitalization on a community that enables his plot. Desdemona and Emilia’s quibble over the Moorish capacity for jealousy sets the stakes for a core concern of the drama, placing it firmly in the community instead of solely in the mind of the ensign. Roderigo’s envy of whom he calls “thick lip[ped]” (1.1.66) Othello provides Iago a doltish and pliant coconspirator. The rationale of Iago’s anti-interracial speech — in which he identifies in Desdemona “a will most rank” (3.3.237) — is

affirmed by Brabantio's incredulous reaction to his daughter's selection of Othello's "sooty bosom" (1.2.71) over Venice's "curlèd darlings" (1.2.69).

Yet just as easily as one might see the Moor's race as an enabling factor in his ruination, those ties can be severed. It might be argued that Iago's racial epithets are generated out of a combination of injured pride and sexual jealousy. It could be said that Roderigo and Brabantio's prejudices derive from Iago, a character whose racism is simply improvised. And although Emilia and Desdemona's disagreement over Moors' jealous natures appears to belong in the realm of racial stereotyping, its foundation in humoral ideologies designates their conversation as a question of climatological concerns. Indeed, in the tangled network that leads Othello to Desdemona's bedside, there are as many ways to supplant the issue of race as there are to identify it.

The agility of the matter at hand should give us pause, because this is precisely how racism perpetuates itself. It persists because it is the norm; it persists because it can be explained through de-racialized means; it persists because it can be reasoned away. If we do not look for racism in all of its complexity, we will not find it. And if we do not find it, we do not have to deal with it. *Othello* engenders doubt concerning its own prejudicial procedures. The play enables us to rationalize its racist leanings, and it encourages the normalized exculpation that is a fixture of today's post-racialism. These functions of *Othello* should urge those of us in the early modern field to assess racism along a more comprehensive standard: as an insidious manifestation, one that through its workings controverts its existence.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *The Battle of Alcazar: The Multicultural Moor*

To consider early modern English modes of racial categorization is to consider the various ways in which early modern individuals might have affiliated themselves with others. For as much as overarching groupings often comprised homogenizing and ostensibly insurmountable points of disparity, alternative axes of affinity provided something of a bridge between that difference. The early modern English tendency to categorize African difference under the label of Moor — despite the circulation of other particularizing terms like Ethiop and Negro — often subsumed the light skinned and dark skinned, the Christian and Muslim, and the North African and Sub-Saharan under one umbrella.<sup>1</sup> But this mode of categorization did not instate unbreachable divisions between the early modern English and those whom they deemed Moors. On the contrary, multifarious and distinct categories emerged to augment this otherwise homogenizing descriptor. This was often the case when the early modern English recognized some affinity between themselves and African or African-descended people. Among myriad attributes, religion, rank, humoral constitution, and political sympathies offered avenues for the early modern English to render likenesses between themselves and ethnic others, and this enabled more particularized depictions of Moors in early modern English literature, travel

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<sup>1</sup> Hall argues that it is “generally recognized that ‘Moor’ is a term of complex indeterminacy that generally marks geographic and religious difference in ways that make the Moor a profound Other to Christian Europe.” With respect to Africa, she asserts that “there are cases in which English authors deliberately used ‘Moor’ to refer to wide regions of Africa, thereby compounding the ambiguity attached to the term” (“*Othello*” 359). Neill echoes this, writing that the term “Moor” was “flexible in its application” (115).

narratives, and histories. And, at least in early modern drama, if a Moor could reliably enact anti-blackness, that Moor garnered not only a particularized depiction but also a crucial elision of their otherness.

This is encapsulated by Shakespeare's Othello, who, while embodying an often-noted Moorish difference to the Venetian polity, also comes to be known by a set of common interests that affiliate him with the Duke and a host of other notable members of Venice. Certainly, Othello is grouped under the homogenizing category of Moor, and he is continually measured with and against the qualities that are associated with that group. For example, Brabantio correlates Othello's blackness with a propensity for rape, believing Desdemona has been "abused, stol'n from [him], and corrupted / By spells and medicines" (1.3.60-61).<sup>2</sup> But Othello is not held to such prescriptions once the matter is brought to the rest of Venice's elite. The Duke and Senators are far more interested in the protection of the state, specifically by means of meeting in battle "the general enemy Ottoman" (1.3.49). Here, the word "general" denotes a key point of affiliation between Othello and the Venetians. Othello is by no means just some cultural stranger, condemnable by Brabantio's cheap but salient stereotype; in Othello's words: "My services which I have done the signory / Shall out-tongue [Brabantio's] complaints" (1.2.18-19). And Othello's "services" — in particular, his contribution to the fight against a common enemy — make it difficult to simply write him off with ostracizing conventions. The Duke answers Brabantio's claim by requesting "proof" as opposed to the "thin habits and poor likelihoods / Of

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<sup>2</sup> See Little's monograph for an overview of early modern representations of the black male as an agent of sexual violence. In relation to *Othello*, Little argues that "the word *abuse* works conspicuously to indict Othello for penetrating Desdemona" (90). See also Loomba, who asserts the importance for Desdemona to claim an active desire for the Moor. She writes that "Desdemona's passion needs to be articulated explicitly because its object is black, but such articulation makes it especially transgressive and disturbing. If she was 'half the wooer' then Othello cannot be a magician who has illegitimately charmed her, as Brabantio suggests. The white daughter has not been raped but actively desires the black man" (101).

modern seeming” (1.3.108-109). “Modern seeming,” or stereotypical assumptions, may characterize the Moor much the same as Brabantio does, but Othello’s shared interests with the state of Venice opens him up to a less codified characterization.

As I discuss in this dissertation’s Introduction and first chapter, positioning such complexity of character in relation to racialism is a hot-button concern in early modern ethnicity studies. Often, when scholarship privileges the points of affiliation that the early modern English recognized with Moors, the salience of difference — particularly racial difference — is devalued. This is the case in analyses that focus on Othello’s often-stated nobility as a category of identity that is more salient than his racial blackness.<sup>3</sup> Such a stance overlooks the inextricability of race from the play’s assessment of the Moor’s social rank, evidenced by Othello’s repeated designation as the “noble *Moor*” (2.3.122; 3.4.24; 4.1.261, emphasis mine). High social status is certainly one point of affinity that enables Othello to convene with Venice’s elite. But when considering Iago’s derisive identification of Othello as “his Moorship” (1.1.32) — a locution that undermines noble status through a formulation that foregrounds ethnic difference — it becomes clear that blackness remains entangled with other modes of classification such that we would be remiss to downplay its near ubiquitous pertinence.

And we should think broadly of nobility as it applies to Othello. His vague, exotic tale of his roots suggest that the Venetians use the term noble not always in reference to some specific lineal connection but also to differentiate the Moor from the savage behavior often correlated with Africans and African-descended people. The phrase “noble Moor” refers to an Othello that, after Desdemona’s murder, is considered only in retrospect by Lodovico. He tells the Moor: “thou wert once so good” (5.2.297), a phrase that relegates adjectives of esteem to Othello’s past.

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<sup>3</sup> For an example of such an analysis, see Feerick, 8. I discuss Feerick’s approach in my Introduction.

If there is one aspect of the Moor's often-cited nobility that I wish to raise — and indeed, there are many to consider— it is its use as a term of praise. And I also want to correlate this type of praise with the conditional terms under which Othello is accepted into Venice, specifically the way in which Othello's blackness must be negotiated in order to broker his legitimate belonging. The Duke offers a key example of how the matter of praise and the matter of race are linked when he tells a pointedly unsatisfied Brabantio that his new son-in-law is “far more fair than black” (1.3.289), an assertion that praises Othello while, in Peter Erickson's estimation, demonstrates that the Moor's “acceptance is contingent on overlooking or sidestepping the outer blackness” (139).<sup>4</sup> This moment in many ways sets the terms for Othello's tenuous membership in Venice, under which the Moor finds favor and thus belonging by typifying “fair” qualities. Paradoxically, in order for Othello to be an admired member of Venice's community, he must set himself in opposition to his own otherness.

Ultimately, this is an unfeasible condition, but that does not mean that Othello is without some passable recourse. For the Moor, this recourse is his military service, which places him in an adversarial relationship to an otherness that is akin to his own. That is, in Othello's campaign against the Turks, he finds a satisfactory outlet through which to demonstrate an abrogation of his own racial difference. We might see two interrelated “general” enemies of Venice here, one being the Turks and the other being the blackness that the Duke overlooks in Othello. Inasmuch as these two categories of difference are, for the early modern English, in close proximity to one another, such a gambit is workable.<sup>5</sup> By proving one affinity with the Venetians against a racialized enemy like the Turks through his military service, Othello gains respite from his own

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<sup>4</sup> Hall astutely indicates the racism in the Duke's formulation, noting that it “operate[s] on an assumption that nobility or virtue is opposed to black skin” (“*Othello*” 368).

<sup>5</sup> As Neill argues, “Moors were not easily distinguishable from Turks, and (like ‘Turk’) ‘Moor’ often came to be used as a blanket term for Muslims of any nationality” (115).



racialized designation and thus finds himself on the favorable side of Venice's "general" aversion to blackness. And this, in turn, enables his contingent assimilation into the cultural matrix of a community that privileges fairness.

This conditional mode of belonging on the early modern English stage deals with ethnic difference in ways that are neither accepting nor tolerant. In order to gain praise, a Moorish character like Othello must oppose a racialized enemy like the Ottomans. And the acceptance that he gains is a mitigation of his own ethnic difference. This is a two-fold process of racial assimilation, in which the Moorish figure is made to adopt the logic of early modern English racialism and is rewarded by having his own ethnic difference overlooked.

In this chapter, I argue that this paradigm is not exclusive to *Othello*. George Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* — which introduces the Moor to the early modern English stage — offers the first and foundational iteration of such a formula. But an analysis of Peele's text reveals a corollary concern. Recent criticism has not only missed the multiple registers upon which ethnic difference is degraded in such a paradigm; it has found the type of acceptance offered by *Alcazar* to be demonstrative of an early modern English capacity to embrace ethnic difference. Such a perspective leans heavily upon a neoliberal notion of multiculturalism, in which an over-investment in identifying transracial affiliations precludes an investigation into the ways in which such affiliations often enact and reinforce racist paradigms. The multinational affair rendered in Peele's text contributes to such a mistaken perspective, as it offers an even more complex and seemingly counterintuitive set of enemies and allies — chiefly among Moorish, Turkish, Spanish, Portuguese, and English constituents.

Peele's play, written around 1591, dramatizes the 1578 battle of Ksar-El-Kebir. As a text, it lacks a satisfying coherence, perhaps because its surviving iterations appear to be shortened or

incomplete.<sup>6</sup> It famously stages two Moors: Muly Mahamet, a usurper to the Moroccan throne, and Abdelmelec, his uncle, the rightful king of Morocco. The play begins in dumb show, depicting Muly Mahamet's rise to power. Muly Mahamet takes the violent path to the throne offered by his father, Abdallas. Although Abdallas was rightful king, Moroccan tradition dictates that the line of succession first pass through all of the family's brothers before moving to the eldest son of the next generation. The presenter narrates a gruesome dramatization of this usurpation:

The passage of the crown by murder made,  
Abdallas dies, and deigns this tyrant king  
Of whom we treat, sprung from the Arabian Moor,  
Black in his look and bloody in his deeds,  
And in his shirt, stained with a cloud of gore,  
Presents himself with naked sword in hand,  
Accompanied, as now you may behold,  
With devils coated in the shapes of men. (1.Prol.13-20)

In dumbshow, Muly Mahamet then murders "his younger brethren" (1.Prol.26) and one uncle to secure the throne. His reign, however, is short. We soon learn of one uncle that he failed to kill, Abdelmelec, the now rightful king. Abdelmelec, we are told, seeks aid from the Turks, and with their help, brings a successful assault to Muly Mahamet's kingdom. As the battle rages, Muly Mahamet is urged by a Messenger to "fly, / fly with thy friends," and so he takes what treasure and support he can bring with him into isolation, where we are told he "lives forlorn among the mountain shrubs" (2.Prol.34).

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<sup>6</sup> See Bartels, 29.

Abdelmelec, the “brave barbarian lord” (1.Prol.12), is hailed in the text for his victory. He is the worldly agent of what the second dumbshow offers in classical allusion as “Nemesis with bloody whip in hand / Thunder[ing] for vengeance on this negro Moor” (2.Prol.3). Peele’s Presenter refers to him as “Good Abdelmelec” (2.Prol.37), a qualifier that distinguishes him from Muly Mahamet, the “barbarous Moor” (1.Prol.6) who is “Black in his look and bloody in his deeds” (1.Prol.16). Notably, Abdelmelec eludes somatic classification, giving us a paradigm in which black skin correlates with wickedness and the absence of blackness offers an opportunity for early modern English esteem. As the final battle ensues, this bifurcation — between good Moor and bad Moor, de-raced Moor and negro Moor — further cements.

The text then turns toward the conditions of the final battle. Abdelmelec stands with his heroic retinue, including his younger brother, Muly Mahamet Seth, in defense of their recently won Moroccan kingdom. Muly Mahamet seeks aid from Portugal’s Don Sebastian, whom we are told is dishonestly led into the fray by the villain. Although we learn of Portugal’s self-serving designs on Barbary, specifically how Don Sebastian is “drawn by ambitious golden looks” (4.Prol.11), the text mitigates the nation’s stake in any wrongdoing, saving the preponderance of its castigation for Muly Mahamet. The Presenter sets these stakes plainly, announcing:

ill betide this foul ambitious Moor  
Whose wily trains with smoothest course of speech  
Hath tied and tangled in a dangerous war,  
The fierce and manly King of Portugal. (5.Prol.2-5)

The war indeed proves dangerous for Don Sebastian, who is killed in a resounding defeat. Muly Mahamet, who “fled the field and sought to swim the ford” (5.1.204), also dies, drowning in the river in his attempted retreat. Abdelmelec dies too, although from sickness and battle weariness.

His brother eulogizes him as “Brave Abdelmelec” (5.1.31) with whose death “not such a wound was given to Barbary / Had twenty hosts of men been put to the sword” (5.1.32-33).

As I demonstrate in this chapter, the sustained praise of Abdelmelec — from his introduction in the text to his death — is intimately tied to his opposition to the “negro Moor,” Muly Mahamet. A focus on these two opposing Moors is just the beginning of such an analysis, however. What Peele crucially brings to the early modern stage is the crafting of a common enemy in blackness — a “general enemy.” *Alcazar* augments the racialized and moral divide available in its source material, and Abdelmelec and his retinue gain distance from somatic darkness and praise by opposing this racially defined otherness. In short, Peele’s rendition of the Battle of Ksar-el-Kebir is anti-black: ethnic blackness is strictly vilified in the text, so much so that its Moors are allowed reprieve from their own blackness if they repudiate, oppose, and destroy it elsewhere.

In the following section, I gloss the historical conflict that informs *Alcazar* to demonstrate how Peele crafts this paradigm out of a complex history of interethnic, inter-religious, and international entanglements. These entanglements offer what I term a proto-multiculturalism, in which the promise of interethnic cooperation overcomes traditional racialism. Recently, scholars have tended to overread the intercultural cooperation offered by the historical battle, specifically those aspects of it that demonstrate early modern England’s disinterest in ethnicity. Most of the few analyses written after the mid-1990s follow a trend in early modern ethnicity studies, in which attention to race and racism wanes considerably in favor of alternative axes of inquiry.<sup>7</sup> Given the history of transcultural alliance upon which *Alcazar* is based, recent scholarship tends to see Peele’s text as a dramatic exemplum of an England poised

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<sup>7</sup> See this project’s Introduction for an overview of this trend.

to ally itself with Morocco over and against anti-blackness; yet such analyses fall short of grappling with the very anti-blackness that is a fixture of Peele's play. My reading thus considers the politically and economically contingent transracial cooperation exemplified by *Alcazar*'s history while at the same time engaging Peele's exacerbation of racist themes. Leaning too heavily upon the intercultural alliances emphasized in the history undermines a comprehensive assessment of how blackness unfailingly codes pejoratively in that history's dramatization. The dominant, modern-day approach to multiculturalism illustrates this critical oversight. Where dominant culture has been quick to champion diversity and transracial cooperation, an overemphasis on these ostensible shows of progress disables understanding of persistent racism, especially the racism that subtends even progressive-seeming interethnic relations.

My discussion of the limitations of the modern-day multicultural perspective — as it applies to today's interethnic relations, and as it manifests in early modern studies as a fixation with proto-multiculturalism — informs a reading of *Alcazar* that tracks its treatment of blackness against the history of the conflict. I show that Peele deviates markedly from his source material with respect to phenotypic difference, de-racing the cohort of his heroic Moor and darkening his villainous Moor's faction. Critics have yet to engage these subtle changes, missing that the racial polarization of these whole factions is crucial to an understanding of early modern English dramatic Moors. This broad bifurcation not only presents an overt racialism crafted for the stage irrespective of historical source material; it ahistorically enacts *Othello*'s "far more fair than black" formulation by de-racing any Moor that stands against the "general enemy" negro. Some form of transracial acceptance most certainly exists in Peele's *Alcazar*, but it does not exist irrespective of blackness. On the contrary, intercultural acceptance is available, but it is contingent upon opposition to blackness.

The following section explores a key example of this process. Peele's drama is performed at a moment of heightened negotiation between England and Morocco, and *Alcazar* stages Ahmad al-Mansur — the very king with whom Elizabeth dealt heavily — as Muly Mahamet Seth. Tracking the process of de-racialization as it pertains to Muly Mahamet Seth provides insight into how the early modern English preferred to imagine their North African allies. Rather than admit Ahmad Al-Mansur's blackness on the stage, Peele crafts an idyllic North African ally, one that shares in early modern English anti-blackness and is thus "far more fair than black." The play's entire cohort of heroic Moors receives similar treatment, and this wholesaling works to craft not just an idyllic Moroccan king but an aspirational picture of the Moroccan polity with which England imagined an alliance. Where Peele places the heroic Moors of his text at the helm of anti-black rhetoric and action, he endorses their potential as political allies.

Yet all of this raises an important question: why is Peele's presentation of Moors — even white-washed and racist Moors — not simply a faulty attempt at showing a multifarious Moorish community? That is, why should we not consider the formulaic but nonetheless heterogeneous depiction of Moors as proto-multicultural instead of explicitly anti-black? The final section of this chapter turns to the life and work of Zora Neale Hurston to explore, via comparison, the inability for Peele's text to offer a positive depiction of African difference. A history of Hurston reception bears out her complicated racial politics which, at times, lean toward racialist sentiments. Her autobiography separates certain types of black people from others, and it openly critiques groups of black folks along the lines of circulating anti-black stereotype. This stance is often credited with enabling her fellowship with various communities of white people — a paradigm not dissimilar from the path to conditional acceptance for Moors animated on the early modern stage. Yet Hurston is also credited with providing a necessary notion of black people as a

multifarious and complex group. While a multitude of reasons contribute to this conflicting view, the turn toward understanding Hurston's work as an essential shift in black literature brings to relief the sometimes fine but certainly consequential distinction between critical and uncritical notions of belonging and acceptance. This chapter concludes by demonstrating how Hurston foregrounds a valuation of people that exceeds racial designation while still embracing racial differences. By contrast, Peele's text embraces racial others, but it does so through an assimilative paradigm that denigrates and attempts to expunge difference.

### **The Multicultural Moor**

Where George Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* falls short of offering either a compelling or even completely coherent drama, it carries notable pertinence to Elizabethan conceptions of interethnic and multinational relations. In taking for its source the 1578 Battle of Three Kings, known also as the Battle of Ksar-el-Kebir, it plunges us — as it did its early modern audience — into a retelling of a deeply consequential conflict involving notable Moorish, Turkish, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, and English players.<sup>8</sup> Historically, the conflict originated between Mulai Mohammed el-Meslokh and Abd el-Malek, his uncle. In 1574, Mulai Mohammed succeeded his father, Abdallah al-Ghalib, and became king of Morocco, despite a Saadian tradition of succession that first passed the crown through a generation of brothers. The kingdom remained his until 1576, when his uncle, accompanied with a large Ottoman force, reclaimed the throne by capturing Fez. The defeat forced Mulai Mohammed into exile, and eventually led him to enlist aid from the king of Portugal, Don Sebastian. Sebastian saw the opportunity as one in

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<sup>8</sup> Most of this history is drawn from Bovill's exhaustive monograph on the Battle of Ksar-El-Kebir and D'Amico's comprehensive overview of England's relationship to the Moorish world. For Portuguese history, I have consulted Disney.

which he might oppose a threatening Ottoman empire and secure valuable dominion over North Africa, thereby securing glory for himself and the Catholic faith.<sup>9</sup> To accomplish this, he gathered something of an international force. His army included the famous English adventurer, Thomas Stukeley, who was himself originally on a mission to claim Ireland for Pope Gregory XIII.<sup>10</sup> It also included halfhearted backing from Philip II of Spain, who allied himself against the Turks but did not commit a great deal of support, most likely because he was both stressed for resources and also recognized that Sebastian's forces were outmatched.<sup>11</sup>

The ensuing battle took place in August of 1578 near Ksar el-Kebir (known in early modern England as Alcazar). It left all three "kings" in attendance dead, along with Stukeley. Sebastian and Stukeley were killed in battle, a predictable outcome in hindsight, as Abd el-Malek's forces were far superior. Mulai Mohammed drowned, purportedly after fleeing the lost contest.<sup>12</sup> And although Abd el-Malek's soldiers won the battle, he perished of illness. Legend has it that this fact was hidden from his troops in order to maintain order and morale.<sup>13</sup> Abd el-Malek's efforts in the battle are glowingly eulogized in Montaigne's "Against do-nothingness." In the battle's aftermath, in accordance with the tradition of succession, Abd el-Malek was succeeded by his younger brother, Ahmad al-Mansur, who ruled until his death in 1603.

The conflict itself brought into relief larger international networks and alliances. Most immediately, opposing Catholic and Ottoman interests were filtered through the dispute between the two warring Moroccans. With an ally in North Africa, the Ottomans would be better poised for an attack on mainland Spain. Although this never came to fruition, it was nonetheless a

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<sup>9</sup> According to Bovill, the ambitious Sebastian was promised "emperorship" over Morocco by Mulai Mohammed (17).

<sup>10</sup> See Bovill, 79-83.

<sup>11</sup> Concerning Phillip's hesitance to fully support Sebastian, see Bovill 53-61.

<sup>12</sup> Concerning the deaths of Sebastian, Stukeley, and Mulai Mohammed, see Bovill 142-143.

<sup>13</sup> See Bovill, 132-135.



condition of the Turkish empire's alliance with Abd el-Malek.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Sebastian's support from Spain (however tepid) and Rome represented a desire to see the Ottoman empire denied any claim on Barbary.<sup>15</sup> A victory by Mulai Mohammed would have given Catholic Europe a powerful and well-positioned ally if not greater claim to valuable land in North Africa. Moreover, such a victory stood to solidify a papal bull that gave Portugal proprietary trading rights with Barbary, enforcing Rome's authority to dictate international commerce.<sup>16</sup>

Yet as much as the concerns of these peripheral polities hung in the balance, the conflict's most wide-reaching ramification — at least for Europe — was the absorption of the Portuguese state into the Spanish empire.<sup>17</sup> The death of Don Sebastian was disastrous for the country's sovereignty. The monarch had yet to produce an heir, which left no stable line of succession for the House of Aviz. His crown passed to his Great-Uncle, Cardinal Henry, who ruled for only two years before dying, heirless, in 1580. The last surviving legitimate claimants, Catherine, Duchess of Braganza, Don Antonio, and Philip II, were all grandchildren to Manuel I of Portugal. Catherine attempted to claim the throne, but she was ultimately dismissed in favor of her cousin, Don Antonio, who had accompanied Sebastian to Morocco, was captured there, and was ransomed in time to take the throne in 1580. Antonio, though, would only hold the crown for a little over a month, as Philip II soon invaded under the pretense of a stronger claim. Portugal was subsumed into the Habsburg empire following Phillip II's successful incursion. The country would not gain its independence again for sixty years.

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<sup>14</sup> Bovill writes that the conditions under which Ottoman Sultan Murad III supplied military support was “a cash payment of 500,000 ounces of gold, and promises to join in an aggressive alliance against Spain and to grant Turkish corsairs free use of the Atlantic port of Larache” (22).

<sup>15</sup> According to Bovill, Pope Gregory XIII gave “the expedition his blessing” along with “the coveted bull of the Holy Crusade” (71).

<sup>16</sup> The bull can be traced back to Alexander the VI. See Bovill, 43-44.

<sup>17</sup> For an extended overview of Portugal's political turmoil from 1580-1640, see Disney 192-220.

England was officially uninvolved in the Moroccan conflict — Stukeley being something of an ex-pat, if not an enemy, because of his designs on Ireland — but there was a considerable amount at stake for Elizabeth's regime. Any growth of the Habsburg Empire would be troubling, given the icy relationship between England and Spain. And in contravention to the papal bull that gave exclusive rights of trade with Barbary to Portugal, the English had — since before the Moroccan civil war — traded with the North African polity. Elizabeth was arguably a more attractive trading partner to Morocco for many reasons, not least of which was her (or her merchants') willingness, however surreptitiously, to trade munition to the North Africans, something expressly forbidden by Rome for even Portugal. In return, England received sugar and saltpeter, the latter of which they needed to produce gunpowder.<sup>18</sup> This relationship was certainly more about commerce than it was about any specific political alliances. Despite the polarizing depictions of the opposing Moorish regimes in *Alcazar*, England appears to have had no specific allegiances to either Mulai Mohammed or Abd el-Malek. On the contrary, Elizabeth conducted discussions with both men, and she continued negotiations with Abd el-Malek's successor, Ahmad al-Mansur.<sup>19</sup>

Peele's *Alcazar*, then, brought to the early modern English stage an especially relevant multinational affair, and as such, it offers a great deal of critical fodder. Although the text has not

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<sup>18</sup> For a detailed examination of Moroccan and English mercantile and military relations during Elizabeth's reign, see D'Amico 7-40. See Bovill 43-52, who notes that Papal authority continued to uphold the ban of munitions trade with Morocco due to the constant potential for religious conflict between the Christian and Islamic world. Under pressure from Catholic Europe, Elizabeth took steps to appear averse to trading arms with Morocco, although D'Amico and Bovill do not consider such attempts entirely sincere, given England's need of both saltpeter and an ally against Spanish power.

<sup>19</sup> In particular, Mulai Mohammed el-Meslokh and Abd el-Malek sought bullets from Elizabeth in exchange for saltpeter, which the Queen needed. Her merchants negotiated with Mulai Mohammed el-Meslokh until he was forced into exile by Abd el-Malek. In response to the regime change, she began negotiations with Abd el-Malek, only to pursue a deeper relationship with his successor, Ahmad al-Mansur. See D'Amico, especially 16-17. As I discuss in Section V, her diplomatic relationship with Ahmad al-Mansur ran so deep that the two considered a military alliance against Spain.

garnered an abundance of scholarly attention, recent investigations stress its relevance to England's developing conceptions of religious and national identity amid a rapidly interconnecting globe and growing international community. Peter Hyland, for instance, argues that the text is preoccupied with "Elizabethan Protestant anxiety about Catholicism" (90) by situating its conception in the context of a pressing English and Spanish conflict.<sup>20</sup> Of Peele, Hyland writes: "he wrote his play in the immediate context of the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 and the expedition (the unsuccessful 'counter Armada,' which Peele enthusiastically supported) of Norris and Drake in 1589 to burn the Spanish fleet and place Don Antonio on the Portuguese throne" (90). For Hyland, the events of the late 1580s brought new relevance to the Moroccan conflict, and thus Peele "took advantage of the revived popular interest in the events that led to the Portuguese king Sebastian's defeat at Alcazar in 1578" (90). Emily Bartels offers the most focused recent reading of the play, expanding the scope of England's — and Peele's — interest in the events at Ksar-el-Kebir. She compellingly argues that what made the battle "so marketable to English audiences was that it underscored Barbary's centrality as a site for global change and exchange" (28). Where for Hyland the drama plays upon Protestant English concerns about Catholic Spain, Bartels sees *Alcazar* compassing a novel site where an increasing set of multinational interests played out.

Hyland and Bartels each analyze key issues encompassed by the drama. However, both explicitly deemphasize the issue of ethnicity in order to make their arguments. Hyland begins his essay by arguing: "when we approach non-white figures in Elizabethan plays, I would suggest, we need to understand them in a broader perspective that allows us to go beyond the potentially misleading black/white binary" (89). But Hyland's suggestion — which at first calls for a

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<sup>20</sup> For a similar argument, see Roby.

movement away from simplistic approaches to England's relationship to its many different ethnic others — is immediately contravened when he argues that critics have misstepped by considering the black, villainous Muly Mahamet in terms of an Elizabethan history of racialization. He argues that “by removing [Muly Mahamet] from the context of the play in which he appears and inserting him into the larger structural context of Elizabethan racial fears, critics have distorted both his significance to the play and the complexity of the perspectives that the play provides” (90). Certainly Muly Mahamet should be considered within the world of *Alcazar*, but should he not also be contextualized in relation to both the text *and* to a broader history of early modern English ethnic ideology? It would seem that for Hyland, perspectives need only be broadened when they serve to take readers away from a conception of a black/white binary; yet in cases in which this broadening bears out negative perspectives of blackness — specifically when a history “Elizabethan racial fears” are brought to bear on the text — we risk critical distortion. Hyland raises essential points for “indicat[ing] the dangers of generalization” with respect to early modern England and racist thinking, but in order to make his larger point, he mistakenly isolates the text from any history that speaks to Elizabethan anti-blackness.

On the whole, Bartels's chapter on *Alcazar* is more comprehensive than Hyland's pointed analysis, as her assessment takes stock of many different factors at play in the drama. However, as Bartels moves deeper into *Alcazar*'s rendering of intricate interethnic and inter-religious relations, she does away with a panoply of identity-based affiliations, including race. She argues that Peele's drama gestures toward lines of alliance that operate irrespective of traditional boundaries: “in setting Moor against Moor, ‘Barbarian’ against ‘barbarian,’ *Alcazar* presses its spectators to look beyond the bounds of race, religion, and nation, to see a Mediterranean ‘world’ improvised from the unpredictable intersections of Europeans and non-Europeans, of Moors,

Arabians, Turks, Portuguese, Spanish, Italians, and at least one Englishman” (43-44). In a sense, Bartels is correct. Peele’s play and its source material is nothing if not surprising in the extent of its cross-racial and cross-religious coalitions. Yet it is perhaps too ambitious to consider the play that stages the antecedent to *Titus Andronicus*’s Aaron — the Moor who’ll “have his soul black like his face” (5.3.120) — as one that motivates us to look “beyond the bounds of race.”<sup>21</sup>

I do not offer these critiques to undermine the salience of these critics’ arguments but to demonstrate the difficulty of proposing alternative lines of critique in texts like *Alcazar* — as, for example, Hyland does in foregrounding the play’s dialogue on Catholicism — without deemphasizing the salience of ethnicity. The concern of race in particular risks attenuation if not omission in cases where auxiliary identity categories are foregrounded.<sup>22</sup> Such an omission is especially troubling with respect to texts like *Alcazar*, which demonstrate an overtly denigratory stance toward blackness. To be sure, Hyland’s method of deemphasis differs from Bartels’s, and both differ from the mode undertaken by Charles Edelman, editor of the most recent edition of *Alcazar*. Edelman gently mitigates the text’s relevance to early modern ethnicity studies, contending that “only when Aaron, the Prince of Morocco, and Othello reach the stage, each of them a single black man in a white man’s world, would what Peele began come to fruition” (33). For Edelman, “a key factor is missing. These Moors never reflect upon their own race, for they

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<sup>21</sup> It is worth noting that Peele is now seen as a collaborator of Shakespeare’s on *Titus Andronicus*, which makes the link between Muly Muhammed’s being “Black in his look and bloody in his deeds” and Aaron’s having “his soul black like his face” that much more cogent.

<sup>22</sup> This follows the trend in early modern ethnicity studies outlined in this project’s Introduction, in which departures from the scholarship of the 1990s that focused on early modern England’s prejudicial capacities often preclude critical avenues that indicate early modern racism. As I also note in my introduction, this is not always the case in current criticism. Burton and Loomba, for example, gesture towards a more intersectional view of early modern categories of identity, arguing for the acknowledgement of “the place of religion, gender, class, and sexuality as central to the formation of and workings of racial ideologies” (8). That said, a lack of interdisciplinary discourse with the broader field of critical race studies still overwhelmingly renders the investigation of these categories in connection with race a fraught endeavor, apt to participate in unacknowledged, dominant methods of circumventing and downplaying the urgency of racialist modes.

are in their own country; if the play has ‘outsiders,’ they are the Europeans” (33). In Edelman’s analysis, the scrutinized position of the “other” is effectively reversed due to the play’s primary setting, a view that implies that racism is not much of a factor in *Alcazar* because the Moors are not specifically “othered” and Moorish ethnicity is not something that they themselves explicitly consider.<sup>23</sup>

It is striking that these various perspectives strongly contravene previous scholarship on the play. Investigations by Eldred Jones and Anthony Barthelemy demonstrate how the play’s depiction of Muly Mahamet catapults English dramatic connotations of phenotypic blackness with moralistic blackness. They note that the dichotomous, and in Barthelemy’s words “allegorical” (78), opposition of white and black played out by Abdelmelec and Muly Mahamet translates moral categories into racial ones.<sup>24</sup> For Barthelemy, the rendering of Muly Mahamet plays directly into English stereotypes about black men.<sup>25</sup> Given these cogent assertions, how might a view of the play be “distorted” (Hyland 90) if brought into conversation with Elizabethan racism? How are Moors not “outsiders” when Moorish blackness is the play’s visual sign of

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<sup>23</sup> It is worth noting that a number of scenes also take place in Portugal, one in which Muly Mahamet’s emissaries feature as pagans, enacting “religious vows / And ceremonies” (2.4.25-26) where they produce a “blazing brand of fire” (2.4.23) into which they offer their hands (2.4.32).

<sup>24</sup> For Barthelemy, Peele takes older allegorical models of the moralistically black Vice figure and maps it onto a history that gives him an ethnically black villain, such that “when the audience sees Muly Mahamet behave in a manner in concert with its traditional views of blackness, the metaphor of blackness receives reconfirmation and renewed credibility in the real world” (79). Jones contends that “Abdilmelec [sic] emerges as the prototype of the dignified ‘white’ Moor, endowed with a romantic oriental dignity, wise and, according to his own lights, pious. If he is the forerunner of any other character it is of Shakespeare’s Prince of Morocco. Muly is an altogether different conception. He is the type of cruel Moor who is usually portrayed, as he is here, as black. Historical accident thus combined with popular rumour [sic] to produce Muly, who headed a line of black Moors on stage” (49). This racialized binary is so evident that when Ania Loomba mentions *Alcazar* in her *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*, she succinctly and accurately notes that the play “splits Moors into black and white, treacherous and upright” and that “the black Muly absorbs Christian antipathy to Islam as well as to blackness” (74).

<sup>25</sup> Concerning *Alcazar*’s impact, Barthelemy argues that “The assumption that real black men are as truly evil as fallen black angels, if ever in doubt, receives new validation and renewed dramatic vitality” (84).

alienation? How might the play prompt us to think “beyond the bounds of race” if it holds steadily to this racialized paradigm?

The quick — perhaps too quick — answer to these questions is that there are ways in which the text seems to transcend a strict racialism. Through this transcendence, some scholars see something of a “proto-multiculturalism” being encouraged on the early modern English stage. *Alcazar*’s Abdelmelec provides the chief example. He is repeatedly praised in the text, and his ethnicity is never described in demeaning terms. In fact, Abdelmelec’s ethnicity is never directly raised at all, the only tangential instance occurring when the hero addresses some of his relatives, the “Distressed ladies and ye dames of Fez, / Sprung from the true Arabian Muly Sharif, / The lodestar and the honour of our line” (1.1.49-51). Moreover, his cooperation with Christians is exemplary, speaking to the viability for intercultural collaboration. Before the play’s final battle, Abdelmelec even looks to warn the hostile Catholic Don Sebastian, telling his retinue “But for I have myself a soldier been, / I have in pity to the Portugal / Sent secret messages to counsel him” (3.2.9-11). By these measures, the text does, in Bartels’s words, ask us — or at least its audience — to “look beyond” race and focus instead on the “unpredictable intersections of Europeans and non-Europeans.”

A look at modern-day multiculturalism is helpful here, as it bears out the various tacks taken to contextualize the tenor of intercultural relations. Within the U.S., the dominant culture is aware of the progressive valence of multiculturalism, specifically the liberal push to value cultural heterogeneity. Jon Stratton and Ien Ang delineate the term in this iteration as it relates to the entity of the nation: “multiculturalism could be understood as the consequence of the failure of the modern project of the nation-state, which emphasized unity and sameness — a trope of identity — over difference and diversity...multiculturalism valorizes diversity where the classic

modern nation-state valorized homogeneity” (138). At least in its aspirations, such a perspective appears anti-racist. It pushes the nation state to value difference and to collect that heterogeneity under one common category or another. Here that category is nationally conceived; yet these tenets are applicable to wider models. In relation to *Alcazar* — or to the proto-multiculturalism ascribed to *Alcazar* — this model applies to an international framework, forging affiliations across early modern polities. The virtue of Peele’s text, then, would be its ability to look outside of a parochial England — and its racial and religious norms — and value Abdelmelec despite qualities that would otherwise exclude him from such praise. This may sound a bit like an anachronistic progressivism, but it is precisely the belief in such a capacity that undergirds some more recent pushes in early modern ethnicity studies.

It is perhaps not misguided to see or ascribe some liberal-leaning thought to a text like *Alcazar*. But in doing so, it is important to remain attuned to the manner in which such a critical orientation can unwittingly overlook processes and mechanisms that depend on racialism. In *Alcazar*, this pitfall is precisely what is issued in by Peele’s brand of multicultural acceptance, which is contingent upon a crucial white-washing. Abdelmelec’s ethnicity is a non-issue, which immediately appears a “more liberal” early modern orientation to race; yet Abdelmelec’s race, by the same token, is entirely omitted.<sup>26</sup> This is at odds with the embrace of difference necessary for a workable multiculturalism. Abdelmelec is never described by the term “Moor,” despite a stated relation to Muly Mahamet. And the closest the hero comes to an association with Moors are his brief references to his larger forces: to the “Moors that now with us do wend” (1.1.68) and to

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<sup>26</sup> I do not specifically treat religion in this chapter, but it is a topic worth investigating with respect to *Alcazar*’s assimilative procedures. Moors of the heroic faction — Abdelmelec, Zareo, and Muly Mahamet Seth respectively — all appear to refer to “God” (4.1.69); (5.1.205); (5.1.215) as opposed to “gods,” a rhetoric that complicates traditional English depictions of Muslim characters on the early modern stage as pagans and instead appears to subsume them into a Christian monotheism.



“our Moors” that “have won the day” (2.1.5). This omission is quite obvious, attracting an unsatisfactory explication by Edelman, who is at pains to emphasize the otherness of one of Abdelmelec’s associates. He writes that the

assertion that the title ‘Moor’ is never used in reference to a particular character except for Muly Mahamet is not quite accurate: the entering stage direction of 1.1 reads “enter Abdelmelec with Calespius Bashaw and his guard, and Zareo, a Moor, with soldiers.” True, the audience does not hear these words, but that is irrelevant, since Zareo and others are there to be *seen*. (30, emphasis mine)

The particularities here are key. Indeed, the audience does not “hear” these words; yet there is nothing to suggest that even the unheard labeling of Zareo as a Moor meant that he was the type of black, “negro Moor” that the text so openly vilifies and which would have been “seen” by an audience. As I clarify later, if Abdelmelec is anything in Peele’s source text, he is a white-skinned Moor, making Zareo’s Moorish label nothing of a direct reference to blackness.

That said, scholarly attempts to demonstrate that Abdelmelec is allied with black characters — or, in effect, that Abdelmelec has black friends — should clue us in to the modern-day frameworks of race that inflect scholarship that hopes to downplay the salience of early modern racialist logics. In such scholarship, there is an emphasis on promoting the unimportance of race while concomitantly leveraging what are ultimately facile transracial connections. The modern-day analogue to this amounts to a pervasive dual-pronged denial of racialism, in which a conservative colorblindness asserts that a focus on racial difference obscures our view of more salient concerns (something akin to Hyland’s claims that race distorts our view of the period), and in which a neoliberal progressivism urges attention to examples of racial advancement

without taking seriously the persistence of subtle racism. David Theo Goldberg sees this mode of elision as a recent mechanism of modern, racist states like the U.S.:

Racist states recently have sought to distribute the means and modes of their expression behind the facade of racial dispersal. Racist states have undertaken to deflect resistance by indirection. Contemporary states have sought thus to dissipate the normative power of critique in two related ways. On the one hand, they have rerouted rightful anger at the homogenizing exclusions of racist states into the circuitous ambiguities and ambivalences of ‘mere’ racially characterized, if not outright colorblind, conditions; and on the other hand, they have pursued superficial appropriation through uncritical celebration of the multicultural. (5-6)

It is perhaps especially this “uncritical celebration of the multicultural” that must be attended to in early modern ethnicity studies. I do not raise Goldberg’s assertion to demonstrate that recent trends in early modern ethnicity studies are in any way intentionally enacting what is the overarching mechanism of a larger, racist cultural matrix. Rather, the pervasive nature of such a cultural trend instead promotes dominant perspectives that seem to many to be anti-racist. Those that pursue such lines of thought do so with the hope of promoting — as Bartels does — something liberal, progressive, or radical. Given such proclivities, it is necessary to deeply investigate the criteria through which we see early modern England accepting and praising its cultural others. For Peele’s acceptance of Abdelmelec, this praise is not in valorizing difference but in omitting it. What remains noteworthy about *Alcazar*’s approach to race — specifically in light of its relationship to the deeply complex, multinational affair upon which its narrative springs — is its ability to extend racialism over and above any inherent particularities that might otherwise undermine it.

## “This Negro” or These Negroes

To speak of blackness in *Alcazar* is to speak directly to phenotypic difference. Its villainous Muly Mahamet is repeatedly described as a “negro,” a term that qualifies his designation as a Moor. For the early modern English — as for us — the term aimed to describe a somatic African darkness.<sup>27</sup> In Peele’s play, the term is used in combination with a set of castigations. At the play’s opening, we are told of “the barbarous Moor, / The negro Muly Hamet that withholds / The kingdom from his uncle Abdelmelec” (1.Prol.6-8). In this way, the play links Muly Mahamet’s “black” “look” and his “bloody deeds.” The argument that a “black look,” even in relation to a Moorish villain, need not be racialized is not viable here.<sup>28</sup> In *Alcazar*, blackness is easily interchangeable with Negro-ness, rendering a concrete connection between racial blackness and moral depravity.

Despite this overt link of racialized blackness and villainy, there are still complications involved in considering *Alcazar* directly related to early modern English anti-black racism. In large part, this stems from the fact that Peele is simply recycling Muly Mahamet’s somatic description. Peele’s main source, John Polemon’s *The Battle of Alcazar, fought in Barbarie, betwene Sebastian, King of Portugal, and Abdelmelec the King of Marocco, the fourth of August 1578*, which appeared in his *Second part of the Booke of Battailles*, can be credited with providing *Alcazar* with Muly Mahamet’s black and Negro designation.<sup>29</sup> Like Peele’s play, it pits

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<sup>27</sup> According to the *OED*, early modern denotations of “negro” were capacious: “a member of a dark-skinned group of peoples originally native to sub-Saharan Africa; a person of black African origin or descent. In early use also applied to other dark-skinned peoples.”

<sup>28</sup> In line with his investigation’s overarching argument, Hyland opines that “Peele might have thought of the blackness of Muly Mahomet’s looks in the same way as Shakespeare apparently did of the ‘black-fac’d Clifford’ in the bloody act of murdering Rutland (1.1.157); he does not refer to literal blackness, but to a metaphorical state of vicious hatred” (95-96).

<sup>29</sup> *The Explanation of the true and lawful right and tytyle of the Most Excellent Prince Anthonie* (1585) and George Whetstone’s Chapter 13 of *The English Mirror* (1586) are two other sources that Peele likely employed. Although neither are concerned with the battle but are instead focused on Philip II’s accession to the Portuguese throne. For more detail on Peele’s use of sources, see Edelman 26-27.

a dark-skinned, villainous Muly Mahamet against a heroic, not somatically black, Abdelmelec. And where we might be tempted to at least correlate Polemon's account as a distinctly early modern English invention, it is primarily a translation, and one that made its way through various European iterations. According to Edelman, Polemon's text "was originally written by the Portuguese Frey Luis Nieto, translated anonymously into French in 1579 and then from French into Latin by Thomas Freigius" (26). Thus, before Peele stages Muly Mahamet, and before Polemon brings him to early modern England in a history, the racialized formulation circulated outside of England. Thus, Muly Mahamet's ethnic blackness cannot be originally credited to either Peele or Polemon.<sup>30</sup>

Peele's play does, however, emphasize race in a way that Polemon's text does not. Muly Mahamet's somatic blackness is only mentioned twice in Polemon's translation, while in the play it appears four times in the prologue alone. But despite Peele's heightened interest in correlating his villain's blackness with evil deeds, the connection, as it appears on the early modern stage, is not an adequate test of the play's racialism. By contrast, this single connection is itself an insufficient example, specifically because it has roots in an account that would have been seen as factual at the time.<sup>31</sup> This is not to suggest that Muly Mahamet's blackness is not crucial to understanding the history of Moors on the early modern stage. It is rather to demonstrate that the play's interest in race — and its relevance to understanding early modern England's dramatic relationship to Moors — is a point of analysis that exceeds the phenotypic bifurcation of the play's hero and villain.

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<sup>30</sup> Bovill claims that Mulai Mohammed el-Meslukh "had inherited the dark skin of his slave mother and was therefore known as El-Mutuakel, the Black Sultan" (21-22).

<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Peele's borrowing of Muly Mahamet's blackness from a historical account offers a facile route toward exculpating the play and its playwright from racist leanings.

*Alcazar*'s deeper interest in race is best exemplified by the distinct way that it strictly aligns Abdelmelec and Muly Mahamet's respective cohorts by color. The text does more than give us an intensified iteration of Polemon's black and villainous Mulai Mohammed el-Meslokh; it works against its source to craft racialized factions. Take Polemon's account of Mulai Mohammed el-Meslokh's exile after his initial defeat by Abdelmelec.

In the meane time Muley Mahamet, who had gotten him to the streights of mount Clario, beganne straight waie to gather together some souldiers, and among them some outlawes & theeves: in so much that he had gathered together five hundred harquebuqiers, and two hundreth horse men with sheelde and Speare. Being furnished with which bands, he beganne to commit robberies, he spoiled those that he met, and sacked the villages, and places that laie under mount Clario.

This behavior eventually garners retaliation by the new king, Abdelmelec, who "discomfited Muley Mahamet in certain places, and almost wholie destroyed all his band as wel footemen and horsemen, and forced him to hide himselfe in the verie thicke woodes, and inaccessible craggess of the mountaine, where hee lurked above a yeere, almost killed with colde, snowe, and other miseries."

This account, which depicts Mulai Mohammed el-Meslokh allying his meager remaining army with thieves and eventually finding himself isolated and destitute, is an antecedent to a similar moment in *Peele*. There, the presenter tells us that Muly Mahamet was "chased from his dignity and his diadem / And lives forlorn among the mountain shrubs, / And makes his food the flesh of savage beasts" (2.Prol.33-35). *Peele* dramatizes this last line by presenting a brief moment between Muly Mahamet and his wife, Calipolis. The villain tells his wife to "faint no

more,” offering her “this flesh I forcèd from a lioness” (2.3.70-71). After giving his wife the plunder, he lectures her to learn from the recently robbed animal:

to esteem  
Penury plenty, in extremest dearth,  
Who when she saw her foragement bereft,  
Pined not in melancholy or childish fear,  
But as brave minds are strongest in extremes,  
So she redoubling her former force  
Ranged thorough the woods, and rent the breeding vaults  
Of proudest savages to save herself. (2.3.73-80)

This moment finds the despondent Muly Mahamet at a turning point. The lesson here is as much for Muly Mahamet as it is for Calipolis. The Moor looks toward “redoubling” his own “force,” starting with reinvigorating his wife. And this motivation he hopes will disseminate among his troops. But there is a key switch made between the “outlawes,” “theeves,” and remaining soldiers of Polemon’s formulation and the cohort that Peele’s Muly Mahamet looks to embolden. Instead of the variegated bunch that lack any racialized description in the source text, Peele counts those remaining in the mountains as negroes, asking his wife to “make thy son and negroes here good cheer. / Feed and be fat that we may meet the foe / With strength and terror to revenge our wrong” (2.3.100-102).

Critics have thus far missed this deviation from the source, but it is critical to recognizing the distinct racialism that Peele invents. Thieves and outlaws are transmuted into negroes, and those troops willing to follow the villainous Muly Mahamet into exile garner the same treatment. Thus, the text extends the condemnation that might otherwise be focused on Muly Mahamet to a

group of fictitious black Africans. It takes what was originally one negro villain and crafts a common enemy out of the ethnically black. These are broad and simplistic strokes on the part of Peele, but they go a long way toward emphasizing the drama's pejorative take on racial blackness.

Other changes by Peele further remove Muly Mahamet's cohort from any redemptive qualities. Where Polemon tells us that many of Muly Mahamet's supporters are ambivalent or antagonistic toward their villainous leader, Peele renders them alacritous in their fealty. Calipolis is asked to "make good cheer" for the retinue so that they might "meet the foe / With strength and terror." This is a straightforward means of morale boosting, and one that contrasts markedly with Polemon's account. There, Muly Mahamet resorts to lies and coercion to muster his forces. And more to the point, he is overwhelmingly disliked by both the common people of Morocco and the soldiers that find themselves under his command. Polemon repeatedly tells of this unpopularity. When Muly Mahamet is first proclaimed successor by his father, Abdallas, Polemon notes that the various polities under the Moroccan kingdom "gave their allegiance... & sware to be true liegemen unto him, rather constrained by feare, than brought to it by love and good will towards the Prince." And once Muly Mahamet becomes king and is forced to defend his kingdom against the forces of Abdelmelec, we are told that he dissembles in order to entice his subjects to fight: commanding "all the subjects of his kingdoms to repaire unto him, spreading a rumor that he would assaile the Christians of Tangar, that by this allurement they might take armes more cheerefully, because the Moores doe desire no warres more than those that are kept against the Christians." For a great part of the source text, Muly Mahamet even begrudges his soldiers payment for their service, resorting to gifting them after his first defeat

“onelle” so he “might wash out with some notable victorie, the shamefull blot that his unkle had given him.”

Unlike Peele, Polemon offers a Moorish people that are unenthused if not deeply dissatisfied with Muly Mahamet’s leadership. There, “the insolencie and tyrannie of Muly Hamet, made Abdelmelec the more gracious & better beloved of all men.” Yet in Peele’s text, the lines of allegiance are strictly drawn. Muly Mahamet’s followers — the outlaws and soldiers turned negroes — are roused to allegiance simply by “good cheer.” These are not the thoughtful Moors of Polemon’s text, aware of Muly Mahamet’s treachery but motivated to follow him often only through fear, lies, or bribery; they are a much more uncomplicated group of racially homogenized villains.

Whereas Peele’s drama homogenizes its enemy in simplistic and racialized terms, it accomplishes the opposite to render its cohort of heroic Moors. In Polemon’s account, Abdelmelec is somatically white, with a “white face, but intermixed with red, which did gallantlie garnish his cheekes.” Given this, it is easy to see why Peele’s Abdelmelec lacks any somatic description, a rendering — or lack thereof — he shares with the white Europeans Don Sebastian and Thomas Stukeley. But in contravention to the source text, Peele extends this erasure to the rest of Abdelmelec’s cohort. For example, Polemon describes Abdelmelec’s brother, Muly Mahamet Seth, as “of colour blacke, not bigge, but yet taule and weake.” In Peele’s text, Muly Mahamet Seth’s blackness is omitted entirely, despite the play’s keen attention to blackness elsewhere. Such an excision is in keeping with the logic of the drama, which precludes dark skinned figures from playing positive roles.

The white-washing of Muly Mahamet Seth is an essential facet of cataloging Peele’s play within a larger discourse of early modern English racialized thought. Yet Peele’s racialized



faction-making has overwhelmingly eluded criticism of the play.<sup>32</sup> These oversights might be attributed to insufficient engagement with the play's source text, itself a function of the lack of critical attention garnered by *Alcazar*. But I would argue that it is also the paucity of critical engagements — in so far as such a small sampling can act as a litmus-test for broader critical trends — that brings to relief some of the problems inherent to early modern race studies, specifically its persistent modes of *not reading* race. Rather than incorporate the models of interdisciplinarity propounded during the height of anti-racist early modern studies (marked best, perhaps, by Kim Hall's *Things of Darkness*), the tenor of those recent investigations of the play compassed in this chapter capitulate to a problematic unfamiliarity with issues of race.<sup>33</sup> As such, they fail to notice the multifarious nature of *Alcazar*'s racialism. And when put in service of downplaying the import of race in the text, such an unfamiliarity has encouraged frighteningly out-of-touch lines of thought. For example, in attempting to trouble the overt racism of *Alcazar*'s phenotypic binary between hero and villain, Bartels contends that “these [racial] distinctions are

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<sup>32</sup> It appears that performances sometimes created racially split factions. In a fastidious analysis of *Alcazar*'s plot, Bradley deduces of the Plotter: “correctly following the general mode of the text, he had determined to interpret it as an allegorical spectacle, but, in concentrating on the spectacular element, he decided to make one change. . . . He decided to underline the team allegiances in the early part of the play by separating his principal cast into all-black and all-white” (178). Bradley concludes that this bifurcation eventually breaks down due to casting limitations. To be sure, this account is focused on the play's staging and is not an analysis of its racialism, specifically the import or meaning of what Bradley calls “team allegiances.” Barroll's reading also hints at a division between the Moorish camps, although he is not explicit, referring only to “the caricaturing of the Moroccan factions in *Alcazar*” (127). His analysis considers the play's maneuvers with race, specifically the “scapegoating” of the Negro, as a strategy to “evade the central, irrevocable, and implacable problem of the Ottomans themselves” (127).

<sup>33</sup> In their recent assessment of the field, Erickson and Hall point to the “sustained collective moment in the 1990s,” brought on by “the great increase in the number of scholars consciously engaging in a group effort and actively contributing to the collaborative project of building and validating the field of race studies in the Renaissance” (4). Concerning the direction of the field during what they refer to as the “interim between 2000 and 2015,” they note that “intellectual perspectives, even when potentially innovative, can also readily shift toward an excessive academic caution in approaching race that effectively stifles or rejects race as a legitimate early modern issue” (4). They look to the next decade (2015-2025) as a period to make “progress toward establishing the field of early modern race studies with a stronger foundation” (3).

undone by the glaring fact that the two Moors share a single bloodline” (31). While it is the aim of Bartels’s critique to bring to light complexities other than race, the attempt here to disable the play’s most glaring capitulation to racialist logic overlooks quite basic considerations of race and ethnicity. Any close attention to families of color would contravene the notion that a “single bloodline” produces identical phenotypes. As the poet Toi Derricotte succinctly elucidates concerning the African American experience, “black children grow up in families where there is every conceivable color, texture of hair, thickness of feature” (105). In the case of *Alcazar*, cordoning off analysis from relevant critical discourses on race allows the play’s anti-black procedures — on the immediate level between hero and villain and on the comprehensive level between the factions — to go underappreciated.

### **Staging Race Traitors**

Especially with regard to Muly Mahamet Seth, Peele’s strategic white-washing provides commentary on significant intercultural interaction between early modern England and the Moroccan polity. Muly Mahamet Seth is a dramatization of Ahmad al-Mansur, the king who ruled Morocco from 1578 until 1603. Over that span, he worked with both Elizabeth and England’s merchants on matters of both political and economic scope. Of all the Moroccan kings depicted in *Alcazar*, it is Ahmad al-Mansur who had the most sustained and influential interactions with Elizabeth.<sup>34</sup> Among his more noteworthy dealings with the Queen was a proposed alliance against Spain following the English defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 and

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<sup>34</sup> This is not to say that England’s interaction with Morocco was anything close to a straightforward. On the contrary, it was characterized by secrecy and tension on both sides. And the visit of the embassy produced predictable xenophobia by a number of the English. For an overview of the dealings between Elizabeth and Ahmad al-Mansur, see D’Amico, especially 21-40. See also Harris.

the orchestration of a Moroccan embassy that visited England from 1600 to 1601.<sup>35</sup> At least from 1578-1603, if the early modern English imagined intercultural cooperation with Moors, they thought of cooperation with Ahmad al-Mansur and his subjects.

For this reason, Ahmad al-Mansur's representation in Peele's drama provides perspective on which qualities the early modern English envisioned for their allies. And racial blackness does not appear to be one of those traits. The work of Dennis Auston Britton provides a cogent rationale for this. According to Britton, blackness, as a racial characteristic, coded as a sign of a tyrannical ruler. He points to George Best's 1578 *True Discourse* — the narrative that famously correlates racial blackness with the curse of Ham — to show how Best's musings demonstrate that “blackness was also seen as a mark of the unfitness to rule” (37). This is evident in Best's assertion:

[Noah's] wicked son Cham disobeyed, and being persuaded that the first child born after the flood (by right and law of nature) should inherit and possess all the dominion of the earth, he, contrary to his father's commandment, while they were yet in the ark, used company with his wife, and craftily went about, thereby to disinherit the offspring of his other two brethren, for the which wicked and detestable fact, as an example for contempt of Almighty God, and disobedience of parents, God would a son should be born, whose name was Chus, who not only himself, but all his posterity after him, should be so black and loathsome, that it might remain a spectacle of disobedience to all the world. And of this black and cursed Chus came all these black Moores which are in Africa. (109)

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<sup>35</sup> Concerning the potential alliance against Spain, see D'Amico 29.

According to Best, in order to secure his progeny's "dominion of the earth," Cham contravened his father's command. As punishment, his son was cursed to look "black and loathsome," which was intended as "a spectacle of disobedience." For Britton, these lines work as a "constant reminder of a power struggle among [the] brothers" (37). And insomuch as this struggle is racialized in a *True Discourse*, Best's contention "reassert[s] the rightness of white, European domination" (Britton 37). Britton briefly notes that this struggle plays out in *Alcazar*, writing that the "play suggests a correlation between black looks and bloody deeds, and Muly Mahamet's political villainy is equated with a marker of racial identity: black skin" (36).

That said, *Alcazar* also ostensibly troubles this paradigm by presenting us with two leaders in Abdelmelec and Muly Mahamet Seth that it does not demean, even though both are, like the play's villain, "Sprung from the true Arabian Muly Sharif." In the case of Abdelmelec, the text finds occasion to continually laud this descendent of the "true Arabian." These instances stand to demonstrate that "European domination" (Britton 37) need not be the only righteous path to rule. This is not to collapse back into the notion that a single family line or single ethnic designation provides homogeneity, but rather to highlight the way in which *Alcazar* marshals — and, when necessary — fabricates phenotypic heterogeneity between its Moors in order to denote suitable and unsuitable allies. This is at once a distinctly nuanced and patently blunt form of racialism, one predicated on the political necessities of the time yet bound to a simplistic anti-blackness. The play envisions a positive ruler outside of Europe, specifically in a land rife with tyrannous negroes descended from Cham and Chus. But in order to propose the righteousness of these men, the text follows the formulation elucidated by Britton, in which racial markers form the overarching criteria to distinguish between a ruler that might be righteous and a ruler that will most certainly be tyrannical. Insomuch as the English state had imagined some type of alliance

with Ahmad al-Mansur for about a decade before Peele's *Alcazar*, and insomuch as it continued to do so when the play came to the early modern stage, the omission of Muly Mahamet Seth's black skin bespeaks a desire, however fictive and aspirational, for England's allies to skew away from somatic darkness.<sup>36</sup>

This white-washing is one way in which Peele's heroic Moors are positioned against blackness. But this position is cemented in their violent campaign against a black enemy. As Peele augments Muly Mahamet's forces with "negroes," he gives his heroic Moors just such a common, racialized adversary upon which to demonstrate their adherence to early modern English racism. We can see this paradigm play out in other deviations that Peele takes from his source text. Polemon's Abdelmelec, for example, bristles at the thought of Muly Mahamet taking back the throne, and he does so by invoking the usurper's phenotype. There, the hero hopes that the King of Portugal has considered what it means to "take the kingedom from him, to whome it does of right appertaine, to give it to the Negro." In Peele, Abdelmelec also notes that Don Sebastian, "led with deceiving hope" (3.2.1), intends to "plant this negro Moor" (3.2.6) on the throne. In its iteration by both Peele and Polemon, the vocalization of "negro" as part of a derisive statement offers a moment of anti-blackness; yet at least for Polemon, this moment is a one-off that points to a somatic difference that is very much a part of history. Peele, however, augments this moment in such a way that makes clear the exculpatory function that trafficking in anti-blackness provides for Moors on the early modern stage. In the same scene, Peele's Zareo

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<sup>36</sup> See Matar for an alternative reading of Peele's representation of Ahmad al-Mansur. Matar argues that "while Poleman does not emphasize the role of Muly Seth, Peele ends his play with Muly Seth/Ahmad al-Mansur standing victoriously over the body of Sebastian. The spectacle of Moorish fratricide and the triumph of Moorish deception signal the danger of the Moroccans in London: what happened ten years earlier to the Christian king could well happen to the Christian monarch of England, and the same kind of deception that was practiced by Muly Mahamet on Sebastian could well be intended by Muly al-Mansur's delegation to the queen" (17).

capitalizes upon Abdelmelec's evocation of Muly Mahamet's black body. He encourages his leader to "chastise this ambitious negro Moor" (3.2.25). The line serves multiple functions. Most immediately, it emphasizes the very same racial bias outlined by Britton: the phrase "ambitious negro Moor" works to redouble the correlation between blackness and tyranny. And inasmuch as Zareo frames Abdelmelec as the "chastise[r]," we are invited to recognize not just the distinction between the white and righteous hero and his black and despotic nephew but also the assumed responsibility of the white hero to punish the negro. And punishment is a key action here, one that is not so directly linked to the black body in Peele's source text.

The line that maps this interrelation — between hero and villain, white and black, chastiser and rightfully chastised, respectively — onto the text's two main players also applies to Peele's broadly bifurcated factions. In conjunction with delineating Abdelmelec's role to punish the negro Muly Mahamet, Zareo's words also delineate the aim of the entire retinue. His urgings to Abdelmelec bespeak the group goal of destroying Muly Mahamet. Zareo's subsequent lines — that Abdelmelec "chastise this ambitious negro Moor / With thousand deaths for thousand damnèd deeds" (3.2.25-26) — emphasizes the group application of this formula. It makes the punishment of one tyrannical negro a war against a multitude of negroes, and, in its evocation of such a vast number of enemies, it brings to light the necessity for Abdelmelec's entire cohort to share in this violent opposition to blackness. Crucially, these enemies are not the racially uncoded supporters of Polemon's formulation; they are the negroes of Peele's invention. And unlike in Polemon, where Muly Mahamet's supporters are more-often-than-not coerced into their affiliation and thus redeemable, Peele's negro army is fit fodder to be punished by the thousand

for Muly Mahamet's deeds.<sup>37</sup> There is a neat transference here of the villainy of one onto a "general enemy" made irredeemable by their blackness.

Given such a formulation, and given the application of such a formulation along politically expedient lines, the play's final scene takes on deeper meaning. There, the victorious Muly Mahamet Seth, after procuring the drowned body of the villainous Muly Mahamet, decides upon a final act through which "all the world may learn by [Muly Mahamet] to avoid / To hale on princes to injurious war" (5.1.249-250):

His skin we will be parted from his flesh,  
And being stiffened out and stuffed with straw  
So to deter and fear the lookers on  
From any such fool fact of bad attempt. (5.1.251-254)

Ania Loomba accurately reads the racialized component of these lines, asserting that "The punishment for Muly makes his *black skin* into a spectacle of warning" (74, emphasis mine). This warning is most immediately one levied against Muly Mahamet's unruly and villainous behavior. And as Britton has shown, such qualities were linked in the early modern imagination to black skin. It is no surprise, then, that Muly Mahamet's dark skin serves as a material reminder used to ensure an orderly Moroccan polity.

But in asking his people to oppose Muly Mahamet's "injurious" behavior, and in doing so by making a spectacle of his black body, is Muly Mahamet Seth not also mandating that his people reject and oppose blackness? In other words, is Peele's Muly Mahamet Seth ushering his people toward the very same path by which the King's own blackness finds erasure on the early

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<sup>37</sup> It is worth re-articulating here that unlike Muly Mahamet's Moorish followers, whom we are invited to see as culpable enemies fit for death, the Portuguese receive a show of mercy and quarter before the battle.

modern stage? Certainly, Peele takes the occasion to contravene his source text in order to render an idealized version of the very Moroccan leader with which Elizabeth negotiated. Thus, it is plausible to conceive of Peele imagining an entire Moroccan polity consumed by the very antipathy toward “negroes” characteristic of early modern English racialism. In such a rendering, a whole population’s unpalatable darkness might be elided, and the English could be invited to imagine an idealized North African people with whom to ally.

### **Where There is No “The Negro”**

Contrary to Edelman’s assertion, these Moors do, in fact, “reflect upon their own race.” In the text, Negro is the qualifying term, one mobilized by the heroes and villains to distinguish, somatically, between different types of Moors. The “Negro Moor” Muly Mahamet, for example, openly identifies this racialized affinity between himself and “the negroes here” that comprise his cohort, while Abdelmelec and his retinue use the term derisively to indicate their enemy. Of course, in *Alcazar*, to be a Moor opposed to Negroes is to make oneself available for de-racing. The text fails even to refer to Abdelmelec as a Moor, despite his direct familial relation to the play’s Moorish villain. Peele’s Zareo sets stakes that make this de-racing procedure more broadly applicable. He frames the punishment of the “ambitious negro” Muly Mahamet as the exacting of “a thousand deaths,” work fit specifically for an army of anti-black heroes. In doing so, he enables the early modern audience to recognize the goodness, and thus excise the ethnic difference, of Abdelmelec’s entire cohort.<sup>38</sup> Peele’s Muly Mahamet Seth extends this opportunity to his Moroccan subjects, asking them to take heed of the example offered by the stuffed black skin of Muly Mahamet. To follow this example, as Muly Mahamet Seth does, is to find one’s

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<sup>38</sup> It is worth noting again Bradley’s contention that the play was staged by “separating” the “principal cast into all-black and all-white” (178).



blackness erased. In this way, *Alcazar* ends with a proposal for all of Morocco to “reflect” upon their orientation to racial difference. The dramatic effect of this final injunction is to enable the early modern English to imagine an idyllic ally in the North African kingdom, one that stands in utter opposition to all that would otherwise make them different and thus objectionable.

Yet on the whole, black repudiation of blackness adds another complication to the relationship between multiculturalism and racism. At once, it demonstrates the deeper register of racism in early modern English dramas like *Alcazar*, where white-over-black racialism is the purview of even black characters. This transfer of ideology plays out something of the uncritical and racist iteration of multiculturalism, in which cultural others are absorbed and accepted into the dominant culture inasmuch as they conform to dominant racialist perspectives and repudiate their own difference. Yet the interrelated complication concerns the cultural other’s freedom to adopt intolerant stances against their own culture. Instances of black-anti-blackness demonstrate, in some way, a type of intracultural heterogeneity. More critical multiculturalism espouses the reality that myriad difference exists within cultural groups in contrast to the uncritical presumption of homogeneity within cultures.<sup>39</sup>

I raise this issue in reaction to a potential question: does the anti-blackness perpetrated by Peele’s heroic Moors — even if it amounts to an early modern English aspiration for acceptable Moorish allies — necessarily reinforce racialism? Might it not instead represent some type of choice offered to dramatic Moors to stand, by their own volition, against their own people?<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps a more compelling iteration of the question concerns *Othello*: is Shakespeare’s Moor a

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<sup>39</sup> I am reminded here of the popular stances of actress Stacy Dash on race, which, however regressive, represent, with respect to political diversity, an important individuality among black people.

<sup>40</sup> Such a concept was available to the early modern English. A number of critical readings of Leo Africanus’s *Geographical History* contend that Africanus adopted and disseminated early modern English racialism in his account. Burton, however, sees his account as more measured. See Burton, 234-254.

racist because he allies himself with the Venetians and stands opposed to the Ottomans, a racial and religious group that scholars have cogently shown he has some association with?

The life and work of Zora Neale Hurston can provide clarity to these questions by providing an apt point of juxtaposition to the racial framework represented in *Alcazar*. If in Peele's play Moorish characters gain a type of acceptance by rejecting blackness, Hurston's iconoclastic racial politics aided her own acceptance to a variety of white circles.<sup>41</sup> Hurston's autobiographical *Dust Tracks on a Road* tells of — among other relationships that traverse the color line — a happy stint as a maid for a white actress, where she claims to have found fellowship with both the actress and the traveling company, despite being the only black person among them; research with and for Franz Boas, in her words “the greatest anthropologist alive” (143) and a man she referred to as “Papa Franz” (143); and work for the author Fanny Hurst, one of two women whom Hurston writes, “meant a great deal to [her] in friendship and inward experience” (193). Hurston's narrative of her friendship with the acting company gives insight into one way that her racial politics enabled fellowship with whites.<sup>42</sup> She writes that “with all branches of Anglo-Saxon, Irish, three Jews and one Negro together in a huddle, and all friendly, there were a lot of racial gags. Everybody was so sure that nobody hesitated to pull them. It was all taken in good part. Naturally, all of the Negro gags were pulled on me” (118). At the turn of the century, there would have been complex cultural barriers between the Jewish, Irish, and Anglo-Saxon members of the company; yet this is also a moment in which the subjugated

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<sup>41</sup> Here I refer to the assimilationist slant to Hurston's racial politics. However, in a testament to the complex subject that is Hurston, scholars have also read Hurston's work as concomitantly espousing opposing politics. Of *Dust Tracks* and the claims of inconsistency that it garners, P. Walker writes: “Hurston creates an autobiographical persona that modulates — sometimes flip-flopping back and forth between opposing modes of representation and sometimes claiming to transcend them. These modes include...assimilationist and anti-racist politics” (389).

<sup>42</sup> See Robey, who argues that with the actors, “Zora learns to play the fool for white patrons in exchange for their rewards” (674).

position of African-Americans is understood, in the words of Hurston, as “the Race Problem” (171). As such, these “Negro gags” that Hurston takes “in good part” would have concomitantly coded as racist practices. Hurston, of course, is well aware of the perceived problematics of being the butt of such jokes, but her writing contends that inuring oneself to such insults is racially liberating. The experience, she writes, “discouraged any sensitivities on my part, so that I am still not conscious of my race no matter where I may go” (118). Hurston not only finds friendship with the white acting company because of this complicity in the “racial” and specifically “Negro” gags; being a party to anti-black rhetoric made her “not conscious” of her race. The instructive corollary to *Alcazar* is that liberation from blackness ostensibly occurs through participation in anti-blackness.

However, Hurston is not simply the butt of such jokes; her writing also takes part in the criticism of black people. Specifically relevant to *Alcazar* is that Hurston ostensibly draws a line between desirable black people and undesirable black people based on a set of racialized stereotypes. Her autobiography offers this anecdote:

“My people! My people!” From the earliest rocking of my cradle, I have heard this cry go up from Negro lips. It is forced outward by pity, scorn and hopeless resignation. It is called forth by the observations of one class of Negro on the doings of another branch of the brother in black. For instance, well-mannered Negroes groan out like that when they board a train or a bus and find other Negroes on there with their shoes off, stuffing themselves with fried fish, bananas and peanuts, and throwing garbage on the floor. Maybe they are not only eating and drinking. The offenders may be ‘loud talking’ the place, and holding back nothing of their private lives, in a voice that embraces the entire coach. The well-

dressed Negro shrinks back in his seat at that, shakes his head and sighs, “My People! My People!” (177)

There are a number of affinities between the work of this passage and the work of *Alcazar*. First, the differentiation between “one class of Negro” and another is not unlike the fracture between Peele’s good Moors and villainous Moors. Moreover, this bifurcation is rooted in stereotype. Peele’s villainous Negroes conform to circulating beliefs that matched ethnic blackness with “bloody deeds.” Hurston’s take has less to do with skin color, but it emphasizes physical signs that differentiate between the “well-dressed Negro” and the “branch” of black people “with their shoes off” whom, she implies, would necessarily conform to circulating black stereotypes of undesirable behavior.

Such a presentation of black people by a black person did not sit well with many African American intellectuals at the time. The concern stemmed, in part, from what Michael Awkward notes was a moment in which black literary circles debated the “propagandistic utility of black literary texts” (10). As Awkward writes:

Sensitive to the need to improve white America’s perception of Afro-Americans, some powerful black intellectuals, including [Alain] Locke and W.E.B. Du Bois, believing that literature represented the most effective means by which to begin to dispel racist notions that black Americans were morally and cognitively subhuman, insisted that Afro-American writers were obligated to present Afro-Americans in the most favorable — and flattering — light possible. (10)

Criticism of Hurston’s writing and behavior from her contemporaries noted her problematic skirting of the purported obligation of black artists and its corollary effect of ingratiating Hurston with white people. For example, Langston Hughes noted of Hurston that “in her youth she was

always getting scholarships and things from wealthy white people, some of whom simply paid her just to sit around and represent the Negro race for them, she did it in such a racy fashion” (239). Richard Wright also criticized Hurston in his review of *Their Eyes were Watching God* for what he perceived was her playing into white perceptions of simplistic black folks. He saw her enforcing the notion for whites that they were the “‘superior’ race” (25). Hurston, by contrast, asserted of *Their Eyes*: “what I wanted to tell was a story about a man, and from what I had read and heard, Negroes were supposed to write about the Race Problem. I was and am thoroughly sick of the subject” (171). Rather than offer the most “flattering” depiction of black people and aim her work at the “Race problem,” Hurston’s writing and behavior often appeared counterproductive to the project of black advancement.

Hurston’s life enables us to probe deeper the question of what it means for a black figure to engage in behavior that appears to run counter to the welfare of other black people. Engaging this question helps delineate when such behavior demonstrates a multifarious black (or Moorish) community, one that bucks problematic notions of a homogenous black population, or when such behavior redoubles racist paradigms. At least for *Alcazar*, recent criticism skews toward the former conclusion, arguing that the play’s depiction of two different types of Moors points to a more nuanced understanding of ethnic others, in which they are not all simply written off by the same racist stereotype that we see attributed to Muly Mahamet. Thus far, this chapter has argued that Peele’s drama uses this multivalent — or, more appropriately, bifurcated — view of Moors to redouble its racism, specifically by placing the good Moors at the helm of anti-black behavior. However, the Hurston example, insomuch as it concerns a writer with such a powerful and celebrated relationship to black literature, could seem to challenge my assertion.

Of course, nothing concerning Hurston is at all simple. Even Alice Walker, who reenergized public and academic interest in Hurston in the *Ms. Magazine* article “Looking for Zora,” finds Hurston’s *Dust Tracks* vexing in its politics.<sup>43</sup> But what is near-certain about Hurston now is that the confounding nature of such politics are either trumped by or inextricable to what Walker refers to as “the quality...most characteristic of Zora's work: racial health — a sense of black people as complete, complex, *undiminished* human beings, a sense that is lacking in so much black writing and literature” (xii-xiii).<sup>44</sup>

The question of how Hurston can come to be understood as a voice of black humanity, even as she criticizes certain types of black people and speaks of transracial fellowship, while Abdelmelec better represents the reiteration of anti-blackness in the service of a conditional acceptance, can be broached with a return to the phrase that bookends Hurston’s ostensibly racist anecdote: “My People! My People!” Although the phrase first acts as a censure in the anecdote, its concomitant role as a unifying phrase is made clear in Hurston’s recycling of it a few pages later. There she writes:

I maintain that I have been a Negro three times — a Negro baby, a Negro girl and a Negro woman. Still, if you have received no clear cut impression of what the Negro in America is like, then you are in the same place with me. There is no *The Negro* here. Our lives are so diversified, internal attitudes so varied, appearances

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<sup>43</sup> In his biography of Hurston, Hemenway considers *Dust Tracks* “discomfiting” (276). In an introduction to the same volume, Alice Walker refers to *Dust Tracks* as “the most unfortunate thing Zora ever wrote” (xvii).

<sup>44</sup> P. Walker asserts that “Because the form of Hurston’s text is inconsistent and paradoxical, it reflects the persona it represents, who is herself inconsistent and paradoxical” (389). While Robey contends that *Dust Tracks*’s “image of a colorblind, accommodating author is merely another mask that appears in response to her readers’ desire that she expose herself to them” (678).

and capabilities so different, that there is no possible classification so catholic that it will cover us all, except My People! My People! (192)

Such assertions are a powerful rejoinder to the paradigm offered by *Alcazar*. Note that in Peele's text there is absolutely "*The Negro*." His drama foregrounds "the negro" as villainous other, and it extrapolates this designation into a common enemy for its heroic Moors to oppose. By contrast, Hurston both claims and embraces those "people" with whom she might be associated — even those from the "branch of the brother in black" that she earlier bemoans. Concomitantly, she expresses, according to Pierre Walker, what "the entire chapter ha[s] implied all along, that to apply *Negro* as a collective noun is impossible" (394). In short, Hurston both cherishes her own blackness yet rejects the homogenizing presumptions it attracts.

The comparison of Hurston and Peele inverts the often-noted (and often critiqued) relationship between early modern race and contemporary race, where notions of contemporary racism are claimed to anachronistically impede a view of less rigid early modern English approaches to ethnic difference. Rather, Hurston offers a model of acceptance that demonstrates the distinct limitations of early modern models of acceptance. Her capacity to cherish both her difference and the difference of her "people" provides a key point of contrast between the capacity of the contemporary moment and the possibilities on the early modern stage. Dramatic Moors lack entirely the capacity to celebrate difference — or even to claim it — and go unpunished. Consider Muly Mahamet, the black Moor that proudly aligns himself with other "negroes" only to end up skinned and stuffed, his difference displayed as a warning. Or take Shakespeare's Aaron, the Moor who proudly claims that "Coal-black is better than another hue" (4.2.98) and, in an effort to save his "tawny" (5.1.27) son, is captured, only to end up buried "breast-deep in earth" (5.3.578) to starve.

The Moorish characters that enact anti-blackness on the early modern stage are equally salient. Consider Abdelmelec's dramatic descendants and the racism they propound in order to find some modicum of acceptance. Take *The Merchant of Venice's* Morocco, a character whose first line — “Mislike me not for my complexion” (2.1.1) — is an apology for his own color. Or better yet, consider Othello, who offers perhaps the most clear and tragic recycling of *Alcazar's* paradigm. In comparison to the straightforward path to praise available to Abdelmelec, who is able to shirk his designation as other by “chastis[ing]” the black and malignant Muly Mahamet, Othello's is the story of a Moor without an adequate other to other. Undoubtedly, in his military campaign against the Ottomans he finds some strategy with which to triangulate his own difference, thus deferring the tensions engendered by the need to reconcile his Moorish identity to his community's conflicting racial norms. But this enemy soon dissipates. It is not destroyed by Othello and thus does not act as violent proof of the Moor's commitment to early modern racialist tenants. Instead, a storm has battered and repelled the Ottoman fleet, leaving Othello without a locus to direct the racial animus necessary to affirm his place among the white Venetians. In absence of a target for the racist “service” through which Othello is granted status as “far more fair than black,” he enacts his only means of acceptance in Venice on himself. He paradoxically seeks a “fair” designation by emphasizing his own blackness and playing out racial antipathy upon it. In doing so, he enacts the racialism necessary to belong in Venice, but concomitantly marks himself out for punishment. But, as the play's tragic ending proves, condemnatory references to his own face as “begrimed and black” (3.3.392) are only the beginning of a self-defeating path to redemption. Indeed, once the Moor has fallen irrevocably out of favor, suicide presents the only viable recourse through which to regain favor. Michael Neill offers a helpful reading of this moment:



at the very end, when his Venetian self seems to have disintegrated into the unbeing of ‘he that *was* Othello,’ he seeks to restore it with the reminder that ‘I have done the state some *service*, and they know’t,’ before tendering a final act of service in his suicidal re-execution of the malignant Turk who ‘Beat a Venetian and traduced the state.’ (159)

In light of the paradigm inaugurated by *Alcazar*, that “it” that Othello hopes to “restore” is not so much all that “*was* Othello” but all that *was* the “far more fair than black” Othello. And that “reminder” used in an attempt to “restore” such a de-raced status is not simply a re-enactment of his utility to the state in its efforts against the Ottomans. Rather, it is a brutal demonstration of his commitment against a common, racialized enemy. Here, Othello conjures a spectrum of difference to augment his own blackness. He says he is “like the base Indian” (5.2.356) and he asks those present to imagine his self-immolation as an assault that had once occurred against a “malignant and turbaned Turk” (5.2.362). In the end, Othello’s final attempt at redemption is signaled by the violence he enacts against this difference, gathered now into his own black body. He aims to recapture the fairness granted to Moors like Abdelmelec — Moors that stand in violent opposition to a dangerous otherness— by “chastis[ing]” himself. His suicide, thus, stands as proof of his dedication to early modern English racialist norms, the foundational test for dramatic Moors seeking acceptance.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *The Masque of Blackness: Washing the Ethiop Whiter than White*

In George Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar*, racial blackness is rendered as a sign of evil. Peele deviates markedly from his source text to denigrate black skin, most immediately by taking what are warring factions of somatically variegated Moors and turning them into a villainous army of "negro" Moors and a heroic group of Moors that — like the play's European characters — elude racial description.<sup>1</sup> This first public staging of Moors in England wields its anti-blackness in ways that are as stark as they are blunt. Peele draws his distinctions with a broad brush, leaving aside the more detailed phenotypic descriptions offered in his source text.

Polemon's more detailed account finds additional ways to distinguish between white and black in hierarchical terms. The light-skinned Abdelmelec is described as being "of a fine proportion of bodie, with brode shoulders, white face, but intermixed with red, which did gallantlie garnish his cheekes." Further, Polemon refers to him as "a verie proper man, and verie comelie in all his actions and gestures." By contrast, the villain Muly Mahamet is "of stature meane; of body weake, of coulour so blacke" and "of nature cowardly, and effeminate" (Polemon). Even Muly Mahamet Seth — the brother of Abdelmelec who fights on the heroic side — is unfavorably described. Polemon notes that he was "of coulour blacke, not big, but yet taule and weak, and of no strength." Of Muly Mahamet Seth, Polemon pointedly concludes: "he was altogether unlike his brother." In *Alcazar*'s source text, blackness is more than skin deep. Instead, it comprises a range of undesirable physical qualities.

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<sup>1</sup> This de-racing is so egregious that Peele does not even refer to the heroic Abdelmelec as a Moor.

Racialized traits that exceed skin color factor importantly in early modern stage representations of African difference, even while the overt focus rests on skin color. As discussed in the previous chapter, black characters are required to repudiate exterior blackness — often through violent opposition to a racialized other, such as Abimelec's campaign against a negro army — in order to gain a provisional whiteness. In doing so, they garner classification like Othello, who is considered “far more fair than black” (1.3.289). But such a designation is ultimately untenable, as Othello's experience bears out. Once Othello's external racialized enemy — the Ottomans — are beaten back by a storm, the only otherness left to other is his own, and this leads the Moor to paradoxically seek acceptance through self-destruction. This is a process made necessary by the Moor's intransigent physical difference. Because Othello's actual skin color will never change, his pursuit of a “far more fair than black” designation is a continual and ultimately self-defeating process.

But even if Othello's skin color could miraculously lighten, the Venetians would still contend with other physical signs of the Moor's difference. Othello's facial features are part of the difference that ultimately render him unassimilable.<sup>2</sup> These features are derisively noted when Roderigo refers to the Moor as “thicklips” (1.1.66), and they are raised again when Brabantio draws a distinction between Othello and Desdemona's other suitors as Venice's “curlèd darlings” (1.2.71). Brabantio's comparison is opaque until one considers that the texture of African hair is different than that of Europeans. It is important to note that in both of these references to physical signs of Othello's blackness — like in the extended physical descriptions of Muly Mahamet and Muly Mahamet Seth offered by Polemon — his features take on a pejorative quality. The allusion to Venetian “darlings” with “curlèd” hair sets up a

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<sup>2</sup> In Erickson's accurate estimation, the Moor's “acceptance is contingent on overlooking or sidestepping the outer blackness” (139).

contradistinction between positive European features and undesirable African features, specifically the “wooly hair” (2.3.34) that *Titus Andronicus*’s Aaron attests to having.

Such quotidian details demonstrate more than a hierarchical early modern English approach to racial whiteness and racial blackness. They also demonstrate the English people’s increasing familiarity — and at times intimacy — with African people. Such familiarity arose across the British Isles and, in some cases, preceded the Elizabethan and Jacobean fascination with African difference by nearly a century. Consider the early 16<sup>th</sup>-century case of the African women who were servants to Margaret Tudor, wife of King James IV of Scotland. Records place them arriving in Scotland in either 1504 or 1505 as part of what Imtiaz Habib calls “forced relocation” (31). According to Habib, a woman from this group is noted in records as late as 1527, meaning that at least one of these black women remained in the Scottish court for around twenty years.<sup>3</sup>

Records of these women’s tenure at court demonstrate a preoccupation with their physical difference. In a literal sense, their blackness took top billing during a set of court entertainments in which at least one of these African women served as the chivalric prize for jousting competitions. In 1507, during the first of these performances, James IV himself played the role of the “blak knight” and competed as the champion.<sup>4</sup> William Dunbar’s poem “Ane Blak More” has long been considered part of the record for these entertainments.<sup>5</sup> The poem, which takes a black woman for its subject, plays on a number of anti-black tropes that persist today. For example, its observation that the lady it describes is “tute mowitt lyk ane aep” (thick-mouthed,

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<sup>3</sup> For a meticulous account of these women, see Habib, 30-37.

<sup>4</sup> Andrea notes that the woman in this performance was named “Elen More” (257); however, Habib’s research shows that there were a handful of African women, including Elen, that might have taken part in the entertainment. See Habib, 30-37.

<sup>5</sup> Dunbar’s role as the court poet would have placed him there. Further, Laing points to the poem’s phrase “with spear and scheild” as a reference to these particular court entertainments (307).

like an ape) (Dunbar) takes part in a lineage of disparagement, in which people of African descent are compared to monkeys. Ample lips are a key feature of African difference for Dunbar, who concludes each stanza with the phrase “My ladye with the mekle (large) lippis.” These observations, however racist, are drawn from Dunbar’s familiarity with the woman. His claim in the poem that the woman’s skin was “lyk ony saep” (like honey sap) (Dunbar) implies direct contact.

I raise this point to demonstrate how quickly close contact with Africans led the British to emphasize simple and specific aspects of difference. The early modern recognition of such difference amounts to vernacular knowledge about blackness. When Shakespeare’s Roderigo and William Dunbar point out features like “thicklips,” they are not making speculative points; they are noting — derisively — facial features that to them are apparent. They speak at the level of the observable as opposed to the hypothetical. An interest in such detail again emphasizes that the popular notion that “there were no actual people of color in early modern England; references to them in popular media at the time are metaphoric; and the period is race innocent” is a “conventional contemporary mistruth” (Habib 9).

It is with an emphasis on the early modern English’s vernacular knowledge about African difference that this chapter turns to Ben Jonson’s *The Masque of Blackness*. By the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century, more quotidian notions of racial difference readily supplanted abstract or speculative theories of race. This increasing familiarity with African difference enabled more specific forms of anti-blackness. As I have sketched above, this process arguably plays out in the tradition of Moorish characters appearing onstage during Elizabeth’s and subsequently James’s reign. When Moors first appear on the English stage in Peele’s *Alcazar*, broad divisions between black skinned villains and white skinned heroes suffice. By the time *Othello* arrives onstage

roughly 25 years later, audiences have become increasingly familiar with actual Africans as well as dramatic renderings of them. Thus, Shakespeare is able to caricature African hair and lips with ease.

Given early modern drama's increased focus on more vernacular aspects of African difference, Jonson's *Blackness* immediately stands out as peculiar. It is staged in 1605, a year after *Othello*. But unlike Shakespeare's Venetian tragedy — which renders the insurmountable problems enacted by the presence of a black body in a white culture — Jonson's *Blackness* considers African difference in more abstract and fantastical terms. While black bodies sit at the center of the play in the form of African nymphs played by Queen Anne and her ladies, the drama is framed by more conceptual representations. Niger (a river) and Ethiopia (the moon) are the African representatives that have speaking lines in the masque. In *Othello*, the problem of the Moor's blackness reflects the period's eroding investment in geohumoral notions of racial mutability. The question of Othello's difference is intransigent: at no point do the Venetians (or Othello) imagine remedying the problem of the Moor's "sooty bosom" by moving him north. *Blackness*, by contrast, turns on a theory of racial transformation. It announces Britannia as a land where the sun's beams "are of force / To blanch an Ethiop" (208-209), and it concludes by offering its African nymphs a ritual of washing through which they can pursue white "perfection" (303).

All in all, the masque is a short text, spanning a little more than 250 lines. That is not to say that it was not a rich performance. By contrast, its innovative staging and costume design by Inigo Jones provided a stunning complement to Jonson's writing. Characters and situations were matched with elaborate visual detail. Jonson's framing conceit was to stage a dialogue between natural elements, specifically waterways and celestial bodies. And this "invention" (14), as

Jonson refers to it, called for exciting visual elements. In that sense, the text of the play is incredibly imaginative. It begins with a conversation between the Ocean, staged by Jonson as the god Oceanus, and the river Niger, who is father to the African nymphs. Niger has traveled West into Oceanus's waters, much to Oceanus's surprise. Oceanus stands "amazèd" (79) at Niger's arrival, but he soon learns that Niger is on a journey to help grant his daughters' primary wish to erase their black skin. According to Niger, his daughters seek a land "Whose termination (of the Greek) / Sounds-*tania*" (149-150). In such a land, the movement of the sun "leaves that climate of the sky / To comfort of a greater light, / Who forms all beauty with his sight" (153-155). Unbeknownst to Niger, he is seeking Britannia, a place that Oceanus will describe as "Albion the fair" (165). The moon, named Ethiopia and identified as an African goddess, appears at the moment Oceanus begins to describe Britain. It is revealed that she initially signaled the African nymphs to seek England. She takes on the role of the final guide, directing Niger and his daughters to Albion and eventually instructing the nymphs how they might wash away their blackness.

As I demonstrate in this chapter, Jonson's elaborate conceits are an attempt to reconcile court masque ideals (to aggrandize England and its monarch) with a subject matter that risks undermining the image of a culturally sovereign nation. Queen Anne famously chose to have her ladies appear as "blackmoors," and as scholars have noted, this request put Jonson in a bind.<sup>6</sup> Because Anne was his queen, Jonson had to respect her wishes, even though the black body was not at all a representation of Englishness. On the contrary, the English grappled with an inability to conceive even of transracial fellowship between black and white subjects on the early modern

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<sup>6</sup> For the argument that Jonson was constrained by Anne's performance choice, see Aasand. See also Kelly, especially 341-342. For a view that Anne's request was an opportunity for Jonson, see Murray. See also Floyd-Wilson, esp. 120-125.

stage. As discussed earlier in this dissertation, outer blackness all but guaranteed that a character could not be accepted along Eurocentric cultural standards. In order for Peele to imagine Abdelmelec as the hero of *Alcazar*, he first extracts nearly all traces of the leader's African difference. He then sets his hero in violent opposition to a phenotypically black cohort of "negroes."

The stakes were quite different for Jonson. Queen Anne wanted her and her ladies to *look* like Africans, so openly disparaging their black painted skin was not an option. That course of action would have violated the most basic principles of court and masque decorum by denigrating the monarchy. By contrast, Jonson was forced to find ways to celebrate Queen Anne and her ladies, even while they donned disguises that, in any other early modern production, would have made them the object of racist attack. In a sense, Jonson was made to take a traditionally maligned representation of African difference — including the body painting technique that Shakespeare references as "black and begrimed" (3.3.392) in *Othello* — and celebrate it. And he was made to do this at a time when England was increasingly beginning to celebrate its whiteness.

This bind contributes to the masque's broad and contradictory approach to the topic of blackness. The masque brings simulated black bodies to court in Queen Anne and her ladies' performance, but it takes strategic steps in its dialogue to make their blackness seem incapable of infiltrating England. It lauds the black beauties it stages while taking care not to celebrate African difference. This chapter begins by demonstrating how Queen Anne and Jonson each appropriate blackness to different ends. Where Queen Anne's performance choice was intended to marshal the transgressive nature of blackness for her own social gain, Jonson's "invention" employed African iconographies in ways that evacuated their threatening racial components.



Scholars have referred to *Blackness* as appropriative, but they have not explored the definitional confines of the term “appropriation.”<sup>7</sup> I use white youth’s appropriation of hip-hop culture as a model for thinking about the masque’s approach to African difference.

In the following section, I examine how attempts at appropriating blackness engender an inherent contradiction. Kendrick Lamar’s “The Blacker the Berry” is instructive here. The song offers an extended meditation on the interrelation between white and black cultures, including an intro that voices the inherent contradictions of appropriative culture. I argue that the song’s opening line — “Everything black, I don’t want black” — encapsulates the tension between Queen Anne’s striking use of black body paint and Jonson’s overt poetic attempts at stemming the fears raised by her representation. The black paint constantly risked rubbing off, and this potential transfer ran counter to two key messages Jonson hoped to communicate with *Blackness*. First, it contravened the performance’s notion of England as a secure and culturally sovereign nation.<sup>8</sup> The constant potential for black paint to travel throughout the court gave the image of an England that was vulnerable to infiltration.<sup>9</sup> Second, inasmuch as the play turns on aggrandizing the superiority of the English phenotype by concluding with a ritual white-washing, the proliferation rather than reduction of physical blackness was in direct conflict with the play’s trajectory. I argue that while Jonson could do little about the problems of Queen Anne’s choice of representation, he used his elaborate conceit of waterways to render a deferential and containable

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<sup>7</sup> Andrea accurately notes that “Queen Anne’s subversion finally depends on an appropriation, since it is white (European) women in blackface, not black (African) women as such, who are celebrated in the masque” (248). Floyd-Wilson also uses the term appropriation. Working with the geohumoral paradigm, she contends that *Blackness* stages an “appropriation of internal blackness” (131).

<sup>8</sup> The black paint’s rubbing off — its enactment of infiltration and contagion — emphasized fears of cultural mixing and pregnancy at a moment when James I hoped to elide the cultural disjunctures between the English and Scottish people. As I discuss later, Floyd-Wilson offers a thorough and compelling examination of the significance of the masque to the formation of Great Britain.

<sup>9</sup> There are productive parallels between *Blackness*’s celebration of an impregnable, white nation and the modern-day rise of white nationalism in America under Donald Trump, which is characterized by travel bans and a hypothetical border wall.

blackness, imagining a hierarchical relationship between Niger and Oceanus that ensured what he calls a “power of separation” (88).

Notably, Jonson’s conceit worked to counter the problems of Queen Anne’s performance without actually disparaging the characters portrayed by the Queen and her ladies. On the contrary, Jonson’s text finds strategic ways to laud their beauty. In this, he maintains the ideals of the masque genre by celebrating the monarchy. Here, Jonson pays specific attention to the major distinction between English women in black paint and actual African difference. Even as Queen Anne hoped to aggrandize her own whiteness over and above African difference, she never intended to appear truly black. Here, her and Jonson’s ends aligned. Their point of agreement is encapsulated by the character Ethiopia, who comes to the stage as an African goddess, but is identified at the play’s end as Dian, her more traditional English name. This character represents the masque’s care in rendering characters that appear African but, upon closer inspection, are actually white. This practice is made evident by the play’s consistent endorsement of the nymph’s “feature[s]” (71), which, Kim Hall astutely points out, are “the features of European women” (132). Lamar’s “The Blacker the Berry” is instructive here also. Its self-consciously biased perspective that the moon is black emphasizes the significance of cultural positionality. The masque’s failure to allow the moon to retain its African name demonstrates the play’s antipathy to a black position.

This chapter concludes by bringing a discussion of the masque’s approach to African “features” into conversation with Mary Floyd-Wilson’s thorough geohumoral reading of the masque. Floyd-Wilson’s reading brings clarity to a panoply of *Blackness*’s more obscure renderings. In doing so, it compellingly asserts the relevance of the masque to the pressing Jacobean political issue of Scottish-English union. But the reading also underscores the

limitations of the geohumoral argument in accounting for early modern racial intolerance, specifically by marshaling what it considers to be Jonson's more cryptic admiration for African culture as evidence of how blackness plays an "astonishingly positive role" (114) in the text. I argue that the denigratory vernacular approaches to blackness that come to the fore in Jonson's masque offer a better barometer for assessing the culture's capacity for racism. Specifically, it is Jonson's disparagement of vernacular notions of African difference — as opposed the masque's more mysterious renderings — that captures the prevailing sentiment of the culture around him.

### **Pretend Blackness**

The *Masque of Blackness* is characterized by its contradictions. Its primary author, Ben Jonson, was presciently preoccupied with claiming authorship over his works through publication, but scholars now recognize Queen Anne as Jonson's under-appreciated collaborator on the masque.<sup>10</sup> *Blackness* is constrained by the court-centric precepts of the masque form, yet it reads structurally as an anti-masque, undermining its potential to fully aggrandize James by failing to come to a complete resolution. Famously, the masque appears equally contradictory about its African nymphs. Chiefly, it foregrounds their beauty while concluding that whiteness is the aesthetic ideal. In this, it seems ambivalent about African difference. As I discuss below, some critics have attributed this ambivalence to the polysemic nature of the concept of blackness. Yet as I demonstrate in this chapter, if the text makes use of various meanings of blackness — particularly positive and negative connotations of the concept— it only finds blackness favorable in contradistinction to African difference. Anne can only appear as a black beauty because she is white.

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<sup>10</sup> See Lewalski, esp. 28-29.

That is not to say that Anne's decision to appear as an African was without drawbacks. Her performance's transgressive elements threatened to derail the masque's ability to celebrate England and its monarch. Jonson, who was compelled to traffic in African iconographies as a result of Anne's staging decision, chose a markedly different way to engage African difference. Indeed, if the masque offers any major contradiction about blackness, it does so in the divergence of Anne and Jonson's approach to the topic. Jonson engaged with African iconographies in ways intended to evacuate their racial aspects and the threats posed by them. In order for Jonson to steer the masque toward court-centric concerns, he first had to find strategies to vacate the distracting threats of cultural infiltration raised by Anne's performance. In doing so, he writes a masque that, for the most part, uses blackness as a tool to engage parochial concerns.

Indeed, where the text explicitly stages a journey of "daughters of Niger" from Africa to "Britannia," some recent scholarship on the masque has explored potential meanings of the text that have almost nothing to do with African difference. For example, Molly Murray's compelling examination of *Blackness* focuses on its religious significance. She argues that the masque plays out the instability of religious affiliation in a Protestant England that was home to staunch Catholic holdouts and secret Catholic converts. Among these converts were Jonson and Anne. According to Murray, "Anne's Catholic conversion took place at almost precisely the same time as that of Jonson. Queen and poet, as semisecret converts, shared not only a number of Catholic friends but also a first-hand knowledge of the fluidity of denominational affiliation and the kinds of devotional performances that could foster or allay suspicion" (428). For Murray, this fluidity is represented in the text's focus on transformation from black to white, specifically its unresolved ending that leaves unclear whether the daughters of Niger have indisputably erased their blackness. She keenly notes that Ethiopia's "bathing instructions imply that blackness will

wash off, uncovering a color that is at once fairer, older, and truer. Other aspects of the masque, however, suggest that this transformation will occur only superficially” (441). Regardless of Jonson and Queen Anne’s Catholic sympathies, Murray asserts that the play is not “a secret defense of Catholic belief” (429). Instead, its focus on “miraculous, mysterious transformation” comments on “the comparably ambiguous devotional performances enacted and observed at the Stuart Court” (429). This staging of ambiguity rests in what Murray refers to as “the essential polysemy of the masque, its uncanny capacity to signal both a celebration and a repudiation of its titular color” (429).

It is important to distinguish between two points that Murray makes. The first is that the masque stages an irresolute conclusion, leaving unclear whether the nymphs’ transformation from black to white is actually completed. In this, *Blackness* does appear to gesture toward the uncertainty of early modern conversion, with its reliance upon “ambiguous devotional performances” that prove anything but certain in determining the true religious sympathies of the convert. However, Murray’s second point — that the masque “signal[s] both a celebration and a repudiation of its titular color” — requires a bit more elaboration. Certainly, the masque stages affable representations of Africa in the characters Niger and Ethiopia. The masque also praises the beauty of the African nymphs. But at no point does Jonson’s text explicitly “celebrate” blackness. Instead, blackness is regularly thrown low-key shade. This begins at *Blackness*’s onset, which explains that Niger arrives

With all his beauteous race:

Who, though but black in face,

Yet are they bright,

And full of life and light.

The lines clearly refer to the daughters as “beauteous,” but they carefully note that the daughters are beautiful *despite* their dark skin — “though [being] but black in face.” At least in terms of appraising the value of blackness, the masque does not appear at all polysemic.

Bernadette Andrea makes a similar point about blackness having multivalent meaning in her edifying discussion of the masque’s more commonly known commentary on gender.<sup>11</sup> Andrea helpfully outlines the complex interrelation of gender and African difference in her essay “Black Skin, The Queen’s Masques: Africanist Ambivalence and Feminine Author(ity) in the Masques of *Blackness* and *Beauty*.” As her title suggests, ambivalence about blackness brings into relief Queen Anne’s “unstable agency as a ‘feminine’ author and authority figure” (248). Like Murray, Andrea also notes that the masque employs ostensibly contradicting notions of blackness, writing: “As St. Clair Drake stresses in *Black Folk Here and There*, ‘black as a color is a polysemic.’ In Queen Anne’s case, this ambivalence allows for her unsettling representations of feminine ‘blackness’ as beauty while finally enabling the hegemonic dichotomy of racialized blackness and beauty that marks, as it were, subsequent eras.” (249).<sup>12</sup>

There are key differences in the way in which Andrea and Murray discuss blackness as having multivalent meanings. Where Murray sees the text concomitantly celebrating and repudiating blackness, Andrea notes the text’s deferral to a “hegemonic dichotomy.” Andrea’s discussion is understandably complex concerning the various ways in which the text uses blackness, but it helps explain how a masque that so heavily focuses on African iconography addresses the parochial concerns of the English court. In Andrea’s estimation, blackness signals in two distinct ways that coalesce in the painted bodies of Anne and her ladies. First, their black

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<sup>11</sup> For an earlier discussion of the masque’s interrelated interest in race and gender, see Aasand.

<sup>12</sup> Drake’s work with African immigrants in the mid-twentieth-century UK, along with his interest in pan-Africanism, suggests that other valuable connections may exist between his research and an examination of early modern English concepts of blackness.

bodies draw immediate reference to the moral castigations levied against women at court. In staging the ladies as beautiful despite their blackness, the masque “resist[s] patriarchal assumptions about women’s ‘blackened’ reputations.” Second, the text’s final deferral to whiteness represents “complicity with the ideological and material denigration of African people” (249). In other words, Anne and her ladies are able to parlay the criticism against white women at court — specifically references to their “blackened” reputations — by playing it off the more certain undesirability of African difference. In that sense, blackness is indeed polysemic, but it only accrues positive associations by its contradistinction to actual African difference. The white women can be black beauties because they are not actually Africans. Similarly, their “blackened” reputations are made to appear insignificant in comparison to the repugnance of actual African difference.

Another way of putting this is that the masque engages in an early modern version of cultural appropriation. *Blackness* employs African iconographies, but, because of the whiteness of the culture in which it is produced, it preserves a crucial ability to distance itself from any truly problematic associations with African difference. In the case of Anne, the use is strategic. She is able to costume herself in an unsettling representation of racialized blackness. Yet, she maintains the ability to step out of that representation throughout the performance. Where for an actual African, physical difference would offer cultural limitation in early modern England, Anne’s performance provides latitude. It enables her to move back and forth between a racialized and de-raced position. She is able to embody blackness and be disembodied from it. She can collapse her own relegated position as a woman into the markedly lower position of an African woman in England, yet she has the privilege to also distance herself from that lower position and, in doing so, emphasize her value as a white woman.

The modern-day version of cultural appropriation is similar in key ways. Paradoxically, when white people perform blackness, they often stand to socially profit, even while those same aspects of black culture often act as a limitation to black people trying to make a social ascent. Pamela Perry's *Shades of White*, which examines white adolescents' relationship to racial identity in high school, puts the process into concrete terms. In an interview with a student named Matt, she inquires about some white students that appropriate hip-hop culture at a white school. Concerning the students, Matt offers: "It's like they're pretend black guys" (109). Perry seizes on Matt's observation, writing that his "words, 'pretend black guys,' evoke...the core of what is behind the meanings youth ascribed to hip-hop cultural forms appropriated by white youth. To listen to rap and don 'homie' style did not suggest that youth identified with black people or wanted to be black; they wanted characteristics of *blackness*, namely to be 'cool,' 'tough,' or 'hip'" (109).

This privilege to perform blackness while not having to identify with black people offers advantageous stakes. Inasmuch as we can read Anne as a "pretend black [woman]," we can see her trying to capitalize on such a mode of appropriation. Instead of "cool" or "hip," Andrea notes that Anne's performance offers a "spectacularly transgressive and disturbing appropriative blackness" (265). Anne gains the ability to make impactful commentary on her own subject position by appearing disturbing and transgressive. But this is not to say that white performances of blackness are without any disadvantage. The corollary effect is that such performances unsettle norms, and in doing so risk causing discomfort. As Perry's interviewee Matt complains about his school's pretend black guys: "They just look kinda like freaks...It just makes them look menacing" (108). He admits wondering to himself why these classmates cannot "dress like everyone else" (108). Even while these students gain certain social advantages, students like



Matt that abide white social protocol want the pretend black guys to conform. They would prefer the appropriators “dress like everyone else” and quit “look[ing] menacing.”

In the case of Anne’s performance, Jonson’s aims were at odds with her attempts at transgression. If Anne’s choice to play an African makes the masque, in Hardin Aasand’s words, a text that “records analogically, historically, and ethnically, the intersection of socially excluded forces” (273), particularly English women and African people, then it was Jonson’s role to limit this commentary and steer the masque toward a less problematic celebration of the monarchy. Aasand accurately identifies Jonson as “the voice of King James’s conservative, hierarchical vision” (273). But in order to fulfill this role and rein in the transgressive elements of Anne’s authorial choices, Jonson is forced to work with the problematic topic of Africa.

White youth appropriation of hip-hop culture is instructive here too. While white youth appropriate hip-hop culture to push social convention, they are also sometimes able to rework hip-hop to forward dominant cultural ideology. According to Rodriquez, who studied white members of New England’s hip-hop scene from 2002-2003, white youth sometimes engage with hip-hop in ways that downplay the significance of race. For the youth he studied, this process works in-step with circulating post-racial sentiment. He writes that “color-blind ideology allows individuals to appropriate cultural forms by providing the discursive resources to take the racially coded meanings out of hip-hop” (647). As I discuss in this project’s first chapter, post-racial ideologies serve both liberal and conservative ends. Where liberal-leaning investment in post-racialism reinforces a well-intentioned, aspirational view of society, conservative post-racialism seeks to maintain white supremacy by denying the salience of race and racism in broader social trends.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Rodriquez encountered this liberal leaning world-view in his field work.

Of course, Jonson was anything but a proto-post-racialist. Despite scholarly arguments to the contrary, *Blackness* is not positioned in any salient mode of denial to early modern modes of racial exclusion. But the case of white youth using hip-hop to evacuate racially coded meanings is valuable nonetheless. If we recognize that Anne's choice of performance was problematically transgressive in that it forced a "disturbing" representation of African difference, then we must also realize that Jonson's role was to attenuate what was unsettling about the performance. Thus he undertook another form of appropriation, one in which African iconographies could be wielded to the needs of dominant culture, much like the white youth of Rodriguez's study, who use hip-hop "precisely to indicate the irrelevance of race in their own lives" (646).

### **Jonson's "Power of Separation"**

Although the masque's approach to blackness is not contradictory in the sense that it both lauds and repudiates blackness, it is at odds with itself given Jonson and Anne's competing approaches to the concept. It depicts a transgressive, racialized blackness in Anne's performance and concomitantly finds ways to mitigate this threatening display of otherness in Jonson's narrative. In this, the masque brings to mind the contradictions offered at the opening of Kendrick Lamar's "The Blacker the Berry." There, Lamar voices contemporary American culture, rapping:

Everything black, I don't want black

I want everything black, I ain't need black

Some white some black, I ain't mean black

The opening of the song plays out the push and pull dynamic with which dominant American culture approaches blackness.<sup>14</sup> At first, it wants “everything black.” Its voracity for black culture — idiom, fashion, athletics, music, physique — prompts an immediate demand for total possession.<sup>15</sup> Yet, as Lamar outlines later when noting that “it’s evident that [he’s] irrelevant to society,” black people remain socially relegated despite an American desire for black cultural property. Further, black people — as a complete people and culture — are in many ways abhorred in the dominant sphere, something Lamar openly provokes, asking repeatedly throughout the song: “You hate me don’t you?” The intro’s immediate turn from “Everything black” to “I don’t want black” depicts dominant culture’s continuous move to possess black culture, followed by its predictable repudiation of the complexity of racial blackness. As the opening continues, the approach of dominant culture is repetitive yet carefully different, first taking the form of dominant culture bargaining for blackness. It again wants “everything black” but clarifies, in an assertion of a superior negotiating position, that it does not “need black.” It then moves to modify blackness, making it something more palatable to the white audience, suggesting that it would like “some white some black,” which is, in effect, a take some leave some approach to African difference. The subsequent assertion — “I ain’t mean black” — attempts to change the terms of the request. Dominant culture doesn’t mean *actually* and *completely* black. Instead, it wants a modified version of black culture, one that no longer retains meaningful attachments to black people.

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<sup>14</sup> For Lamar, dominant culture’s contradictory approach to blackness influences the way the black community approaches itself. As the song later outlines, as much as white culture plays out a violent dynamic with black culture, it has corrupted black culture into mirroring anti-blackness. Lamar articulates this by concluding a number of verses that describe anti-black racism with the line “I’m the biggest hypocrite of 2016.”

<sup>15</sup> Among other enviable associations black people garner, Lamar notes that his “dick is big,” that his “style” cannot be taken, and that he might “jump high enough to get Michael Jordan endorsements.”

The preface of the masque exhibits some of the tension communicated in Lamar's intro.

Jonson writes:

remember unto us a river in Æthiopia, famous by the name of Niger; of which the people were called Nigritæ, now Negroes; and Are the blackest nation of the world. This river taketh spring out of a certain lake, eastward; and after a long race, falleth into the western ocean. Hence (because it was her majesty's will to have them blackmoors at first) the invention was derived by me, and presented thus.<sup>16</sup> (10-15)

Here we see the impact of Anne's "will" to "have [her and her ladies] blackmoors at first" — the desire for "everything black" — as it prompts a response from Jonson: "Hence...the invention was derived by me." Aasand accurately refers to such annotations as "poetic disclaimer, indicating the tension between royal request and [Jonson's] own artistic demands" (274). As Jonson elaborates in the preceding sentence, the "invention" is a framing narrative, one that focuses on waterways. Where Anne wishes to appear as an African person, Jonson chooses to stage the river upon which those people live. The shift in approach is quick but important. It allows Jonson to employ African iconographies in a way that does not directly engage the black body.<sup>17</sup>

As discussed in the previous section, Jonson's style of appropriation serves the needs of the dominant culture, stemming the threat posed by Anne's transgressive performance of African

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<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting here Jonson uses the terms "blackmoor" and "Negro" synonymously. As I argue in the previous chapter, the early modern English were not adept at particularizing between people from different parts of Africa. Thus, the term "Moor" could, for example, refer to either a north or sub-Saharan African.

<sup>17</sup> Of further note, Jonson's abstracted African presence Ethiopia and Niger are the only speaking representatives for Africa. While the nymphs factor heavily in the performance, in some sense, Jonson's text does not "need" them.

difference. Dudley Carleton's often-referenced early modern record of seeing the masque performed describes the very threat that Jonson mitigates with his strategic approach to African difference. Carleton famously abhorred the ladies' disguises. Concerning their appearance, he wrote: "Their Apparell was rich, but too light and Curtizan-like for such great ones. Instead of Vizzards, their faces and arms up to the Elbows, were painted black, which was Disguise sufficient, for they were hard to be known" (qtd. in Aasand 273). He continues that he is "sorry that strangers should see [the] court so strangely disguised" (qtd. in Aasand 273), noting the presence of the Spanish, Venetian, and French ambassadors. Carleton makes specific note of the technologies used to render African difference. The use of paint instead of black masks was noteworthy for a number of reasons. Among them, paint was something of a new — and, as Carleton notes, more "sufficient" — way to render African difference on the early modern stage.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, this more effective technique came with the unintended side-effect of rubbing off on those that came in contact with Queen Anne and her ladies.<sup>19</sup> And this contact was inevitable, given court precepts that required the men in attendance to kiss ladies' hands. Carleton is keen to note the dangers of touching the women, pointing out a moment in which the Spanish ambassador "took out the Queen, and forgot not to kiss her hand, though there was danger it would have left a mark on his lips" (qtd. in Andrea 266).

Carleton's attention to the "danger" of the Spanish Ambassador's being "marked" by Queen Anne's painted body bespeaks an overarching fear about the white body's susceptibility to contamination. On the level of technique, the use of paint risked transferability. As Andrea

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<sup>18</sup> According to Smith, Carleton "exhibits surprise at the change in technique use on this occasion, with visors and cloth-covered extremities replaced by actual skin painting and blackface makeup" (12).

<sup>19</sup> Much has been made of contemporary fears of phenotype transmission that took place during Laurence Olivier's performance of Othello, specifically how the "Max Factor 2880" makeup rubbed off. See Stevens, 407.

Stevens writes concerning this use of this technology in early modern masques: “Because of its transferability, paint in performance tells a specific story about the body: that the skin is porous and permeable; that selves are not discretely separate vessels” (406). Of course, there is also a palpably racist overtone to Carleton’s observation, which Andrea notes as “his distaste at the indelible trace of blackness he sees in the royal women, a trace which threatens to mark the entire court” (265). In a very real sense, Queen Anne’s desire to render herself as an African is a messy affair, one that presents the uncontainable problem of blackness disseminating throughout court. Her rendering of an African body on stage mirrors the threat of cultural infiltration.

If Queen Anne’s desire to embody an African woman invokes the fear of infiltration, Jonson’s “invention” works explicitly against worries of contamination. As his prologue states, rather than focus solely on the travel of black bodies from Ethiopia to England, Jonson tells the story of the women’s journey at a remove. His employment of waterways offers a novel way to give the illusion of boundaries between English and African culture. This is accomplished immediately by his character Niger, who is not an African person, but rather a personification of the river belonging to Ethiopia. To Jonson’s geographical understanding, the river “falleth into the western ocean,” making it a natural metaphor for the movement of African bodies into England. But Jonson is keen to mark Niger’s movement West as anything but un-policed. Rather, in the first lines spoken by a character in the play, Oceanus marks and questions — albeit courteously — Niger’s presence in the West:

And Niger, say, how comes it, lovely son,  
That thou, the Ethiops’ river, so far east,  
Art seen to fall into th’extremest west  
Of me, the king of floods, Oceanus,

And in mine empire's heart salute me thus?  
My ceaseless current now amazèd stands  
To see thy labour through so many lands  
Mix thy fresh billow with my brackish stream. (74-81)

In Oceanus's query, we can see Carleton's concerns being addressed. Anne's requirement that she and her ladies appear as blackamoors at the Royal court — the "heart" of James's budding British "empire" — comes with explicit threat of contamination, specifically the "mix[ing]" of Niger's "fresh billow" with Oceanus's "brackish stream." Oceanus stands as benevolent guard, paying careful attention to Niger's movements and the threat of infiltration. And it is not simply Oceanus's attention to Niger's whereabouts that instills a sense of control over the movement of African difference. It is also Oceanus's paternal relationship over Niger. He addresses the Ethiopian river as "son" and asserts his position as "the king of floods."

Niger's reply reaffirms Oceanus's position of power and puts to bed worries about contamination:

Divine Oceanus, 'tis not strange at all  
That, since the immortal souls of creatures mortal  
Mix with their bodies, yet reserve for ever  
A power of separation, I should sever  
My fresh streams from thy brackish, like things fixed,  
Though with thy powerful saltness thus far mixed. (85-90)

Where Queen Anne's black painted body raises concerns that "the skin is porous and permeable; that selves are not discretely separate vessels," Niger asserts that despite the contact between him and Oceanus, they will remain distinct entities. This is accomplished by a description of the

interrelation between souls and bodies, which, according to Niger, “Mix” but “reserve for ever / A power of separation.”<sup>20</sup> Niger’s metaphor further aggrandizes Oceanus. In the dichotomy between “immortal souls” and “creatures mortal,” “Divine Oceanus” draws the overt link to the heavenly. Moreover, the distinction between Niger’s “fresh streams” and Oceanus’s “brackish” water is made clearer. Jonson capitalizes on the Ocean’s natural saltiness with respect to the fresh water of rivers to further depict Oceanus’s puissance — what Niger notes is Oceanus’s “powerful saltness.” Given this power dynamic, it is difficult to doubt that Niger will do as he promises Oceanus and “sever” his stream from Oceanus’s current.

If Niger’s promise, bolstered by his subordinate position to Oceanus, is not enough to quell fears of contamination, Oceanus offers another assurance. As Niger approaches England, unsure of which land it is, Oceanus explains:

This land, that lifts into the temperate air  
His snowy cliff, is Albion the fair;  
So called of Neptune’s son, who ruleth here;  
For whose dear guard, myself for thousand year,  
Since old Deucalion’s days, have walked the round  
About his empire, proud to see him crowned  
About my waves. (164-170)

Notable in Oceanus’s description is his identification of the British land as “Albion.” As Hall explains, “this primary name of England — Albion (“white land”) — assumes great importance;

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<sup>20</sup> In Mary Floyd-Wilson’s estimation, this “power of separation” is humoral rather than racial. She writes that “This claim — that the stream of Niger’s river will reserve its singularity as it travels through the ocean — articulates a point of tension in the relationship between corporeal and spiritual matters. Although the environment influences a body’s humoral complexion, which affects the passions, determines behavior, and engenders particular vices, Niger insists that some part of a mortal’s instilled ‘virtue’ remains unaffected by these circumstances” (127).



its repetition throughout the masque stresses England's titular link with whiteness" (134).

Further, Oceanus's identification of James I as "so called" Albion — what Jonson explains as an authorial choice that "alludes to that rite of styling princes after the name of their principedoms" — makes king and England one in their association with whiteness.<sup>21</sup> In keeping with Jonson's interest in making England and its whiteness invulnerable to infiltration, he styles the "king of floods" as protector of the land. Oceanus surrounds the empire to keep "guard" over England, and he has done so for "thousand year." This play on England's geographical isolation culminates in the image of a garland of waves "crown[ing]" the king.

Careful attention to the various hierarchies enforced by Jonson's "invention" demonstrates the extent to which the playwright exhibits control over the problems inherent to Anne and her ladies appearing as blackamoors. Where the women threaten to "mark" (to use Carleton's locution) the court with their blackness, making their bodies a sign of transgressive threat, Jonson works in the masque's opening to significantly relegate the offending nymph's authority. Chiefly, he places the women under the paternal yoke of Niger, who authorizes and enables the journey of his daughters. Niger is doing, as he tells Oceanus, "a kind and careful father's part" (95). And the river indeed shows particular "care" in forestalling any undesirable mixing between his African stream and Oceanus's water, which surrounds England. Jonson adds an additional layer of control by emphasizing Oceanus's paternal relationship and puissance over Niger. Oceanus's preoccupation with keeping "guard" over England places the sanctity of the island in the highest care. As such, Jonson's abstraction of blackness to a body of water enables a framing narrative of control over the threat of transgression levied by the masque's painted black women.

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<sup>21</sup> The discussion notion of James I as both Albion and the soon Neptune bring to mind Jonson's unperformed masque *Neptune's Triumph for the Return of Albion*.

All of that said, Carleton's criticism remains. Indeed, Jonson's attempt — however meticulous — to exhibit poetic control over Anne's unwieldy staging decision is anything but a complete success. Instead, the overt contradiction between Anne's problematic character choice and Jonson's corralling framework compete in the masque, and there is no clear winner. Ironically, it is Jonson's quite plain attempts at patriarchal control — as exemplified by his framing "invention" — that makes Anne's demonstration of feminine authority that much more apparent. The messy spectacle of black painted bodies offers an observable and material contravention to the patriarchal authority that Jonson can only manifest as poetic conceit. The final effect of this conflict produced a masque that Aasand correctly argues has "disparate, troubled strains of narrative" (274).

### **England's "Curlèd Darlings"**

Even while Jonson and Anne were at odds over the Queen's decision to present herself and her ladies as African nymphs, they found important points where their ends aligned. Queen Anne's interest in employing African iconographies intended to draw a distinction between the women onstage and the relative disagreeability of actual Africans. The staging emphasized the value of white women — even those with "blackened reputations" — over the value of black people.

Anne's interest in drawing a hierarchical distinction between white women and black women offered some version of the image of English excellence that Jonson was compelled to present. Where some scholars see this vision enacted in the masque's final moments, in which whiteness is hailed as perfection and the African nymphs are given a ritual to attain it, the celebration of English whiteness begins earlier in the masque. Jonson paid careful attention to

vernacular difference in order to accomplish this. Lauding of the nymphs' beauty is carefully accompanied by attention to the whiteness that lies beneath their black paint. Jonson furthers this theme by staging the moon as a feminine representation of Africa, one that reflects the women's very real ability to simply reverse their blackness and become white again.

Lamar's "Everything black, I don't want black" applies to Anne's approach to her performance. As Jonson articulates in the masque's preface, Anne only wishes for her and her ladies to appear as "blackmoors *at first*" (emphasis mine). Anne's desire was never to appear as a black African for the entirety of the performance. Rather, she planned to relinquish her blackness as the masque proceeded. Given her mode of appropriation, this is not a surprise. Like the white youth of Perry's study, Anne utilized aspects of blackness for her own social gain without actually identifying with black people.

Anne's plan to eventually abandon her black paint played to Jonson's mode of appropriating blackness. Specifically, the poet employed African iconographies in order to evacuate their racial aspects and the threats posed by them. Jonson's Niger offers one version of this. Rather than typify a transgressive African, Niger is complicit in the protection of England. The paternal nexus Jonson crafts — in which Oceanus is father to Niger and Niger is father to the Nymphs — stages a set of assurances meant to mitigate the threat of cultural infiltration posed by Anne's problematic staging. Jonson's Ethiopia provides a compliment to Niger. In addition to communicating that the flow of Africans coming into England is policed through the paternalistic river figure, Jonson employs Ethiopia to indicate that the handful of nymphs coming to Albion are not truly black.

It is notable that Jonson immediately treats the moon as a representative for Africa. Ostensibly the celestial body is a universal symbol, being that it is visible from almost every

place on the globe. But in the dichotomy of black and white, the moon is actually a site of contest. Its variation from light to dark (full moon to new moon) means that it can represent either place on the spectrum at any given time. This is a contest that Lamar also engages in when he forcefully asserts: “I’m African American, I’m African / I’m black as the moon, heritage of a small village / Pardon my residence.” The lines lay claim to the moon’s blackness, which parallels Lamar’s racial identity. Of course, the moon is only black sometimes, but the lines that surround Lamar’s argument about the moon’s color provide context for the rapper’s perspective. Lamar reaches out to the Diaspora, linking “African American” to “African.” In doing so, he forges a conceptual link between the cultural network that connects black people in America and the notion of a “small village” in Africa, one that would share a distinct worldview. The “heritage” of this village has a clear answer to the subjective question of what color the moon ought represent. Lamar is aware that this perspective is idiosyncratic to the “small village.” He is also aware that such a perspective is likely at odds with the perspective of the dominant culture. His apology — “Pardon my residence” — draws attention to the fact that a great deal of his listeners would find the views of the small village unsophisticated.

In *Blackness*, there is immediately a concession to what Jonson understands as the moon’s place in African heritage. In his footnotes to the masque, Jonson claims to have named the moon “Ethiopia” because “The Ethiopians worshipped the moon by that surname” (528, note 21). And his Niger is especially enthusiastic to see a familiar face so far from home. According to stage direction, the appearance of the moon makes “Niger interrupt Oceanus with...present passion.” Niger’s subsequent speech celebrates and claims the celestial body:

Oh, see, our silver star!

Whose pure, auspicious light greets us thus far!

Great Ethiopia, goddess of our shore,  
Since with particular worship we adore  
Thy general brightness, let particular grace  
Shine on my zealous daughters. Shew the place,  
Which long their longings urg'd their eyes to see,  
Beautify them, which long have deified thee. (178-185)

Niger calls the moon “our silver star,” emphasizing a sense of cultural ownership. While the moon is not black in color — as it is in Lamar’s vision — it represents a veritable guiding light for Niger. To him, her appearance bodes well, and he is confident that she will “Shew the place” his daughters long to see.

In her first lines, Ethiopia confirms that Niger and his daughters have found England:

Niger, be glad; resume thy native cheer.  
Thy daughters’ labours have their period here,  
And so thy errors. I was that bright face  
Reflected by the lake, in which thy race  
Read mystic lines (which skill Pythagoras  
First taught to men by a reverberate glass).  
This blessed isle doth with that *-tania* end,  
Which there they saw inscribed, and shall extend  
Wished satisfaction to their best desires. (186-194)

Ethiopia’s assurance to Niger that “Thy daughters’ labours have their period here, / And so thy errors” is a turning point in the text. Until this moment, Niger and his daughters wandered

without much certainty. In Niger's recounting, the little guidance they departed Africa with proved insufficient. As he tells Oceanus:

In search of this have we three pryncedoms passed,  
That speak out *-tania* in their accents last;  
Black Mauritania first, and secondly  
Swart Lusitania; next we did descry  
Rich Aquitania; and, yet, cannot find  
The place unto these longing nymphs designed. (156-161)

Oceanus's identification of England as "Albion the fair" is helpful but not conclusive. It is not until Ethiopia confirms for Niger that the island he and his daughters approach is "Britania, which the triple world admires" (195) that the journey can be called a success.

That said, Ethiopia's lines do not simply confirm the text's turning point. They also communicate key cultural reversals. This begins with Ethiopia's otherwise esoteric comment that it was her face "Reflected by the lake, in which thy race / Read mystic lines (which skill Pythagoras / First taught to men by a reverberate glass)" (189-191). Here Ethiopia refers to the signs that start the nymph's journey: the "face" Niger says his daughters saw "in the lake... / As they sat cooling their soft limbs one night" (142-143). It is of note that Ethiopia's "mystic lines" must be read by a special technique. Specifically, they must be deciphered in a "reverberate" or reflecting glass. As Lynn S. Meskill explains, this is because the lines appear backward on Ethiopia's face:

The nymphs were able to read the lines of the oracle, which appeared in the water, but which were actually a reflection of lines inscribed on the face of the moon. If the nymphs were able to read the lines in the reflection (from left to right), the

lines themselves must originally have been inscribed on Aethiopia's "bright Face" from right to left and backward. The "Lake" is the "reverberate glasse" or mirror, which enabled them to read the backward script. (45)

Quite literally, Ethiopia is not a straightforward representation. On the contrary, Jonson's conceit communicates that the moon is actually the inverse of what she appears.

The moon's true nature is confirmed at the masque's conclusion, where she is ultimately referred to as Dian, a moniker taken from Roman mythology and traditionally used by the early modern English to describe the moon. The naming switch coincides with the moon's setting, and is described in the final song as such:

Now Dian, with her burning face,  
Declines apace;  
By which our waters know  
To ebb, that late did flow. (311-314)

In the telling final moment, we learn that Dian's movements coincide with the reversal of the flow of waters. According to the song, the masque's waters know by her movements "To ebb, that late did flow." Of course, the only waters in the masque that flowed were Niger's. They flowed into Oceanus, who was amazed to see Niger "fall into th'extremest west." The moon, who was ostensibly Niger's most helpful guide, is ironically the character that ultimately turns Niger back to Africa. Although the moon's ultimate role appears surprising upon first read, a closer look at her opening speech demonstrates that she intended to put an end to Niger's journey from the beginning. As she explains when she first encounters Niger: "Thy daughters' labours have their period here, / And so thy errors." The word "errors," which Ethiopia only applies to Niger's movements, carries a dual meaning. It marks that Niger has been on a journey and

simultaneously categorizes his movements as improper.<sup>22</sup> Niger simply does not belong this far West, as Oceanus initially indicates. And Ethiopia declares the end of such encroachment the moment she arrives on stage.

To properly read Ethiopia, we must recognize that she is the inverse of what she appears. She seems like a guide to Niger, but she is actually the harbinger of his return to Africa. She is announced as an Ethiopian goddess, but she celebrates England alone, a place that she reminds Niger “the triple world admires.” And she is introduced as Ethiopia, but is finally anglicized by the moniker Dian. In these qualities, she is never fully a representative of Africa. Jonson is keen to attune us to this early on.

Jonson is equally attentive to the ways in which the nymphs do not actually represent African difference. In this, the women find their parallel in Ethiopia. This careful mode of representation begins at the masque’s opening, where Jonson places a key caveat about the nymphs’ beauty:

Who, though but black in face,  
Yet are they bright  
And full of life and light;  
To prove that beauty best,  
Which not the colour, but the feature  
Assures unto the creature. (67-72)

As Hall accurately argues concerning these lines, “The masque specifically warns the audience not to imagine these women as actual Africans (‘not the color but the feature’) by pointing out

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<sup>22</sup> Even the most generous early modern denotation in the OED for “error” indicates something pejorative in the term: “The action of roaming or wandering; hence a devious or winding course, a roving, winding.” According to the OED, The term also signals improper behavior, specifically “A departure from moral rectitude; a transgression, wrong-doing.”



that these disguised nymphs still have the features of European women” (132). Such an opening stipulation serves both Jonson and Anne’s goals. For Anne, the lines further celebrate white womanhood, asserting that it retains its beauty even in blackface. For Jonson, it sets the paradigm through which he can celebrate his Queen — particularly those aspects of her that are white — without lauding African difference.

As discussed earlier, African difference comprised more than just skin color for the early modern English. To audience members, Anne and her ladies appeared as one might imagine: white women in blackface. As Hall notes, this reality “occasions Carleton’s disparaging ‘you cannot imagine a more ugly Sight, than a Troop of lean-cheek’d Moors’” (132). Carleton’s observation is an important reminder that the English had more vernacular understandings of what Africans looked like. The courtier’s comment distinguishes between the “lean” cheeks of a European phenotype and the “thick” features for which characters like Othello attract derision.

That said, where Carleton sees the “ugly” disjuncture in the overlay of black paint on white features, Jonson found an essential line to abide. He cites the nymphs’ European features as the core of their beauty. In doing so, he continually reminds the audience that the women were not actually Africans. Consider Niger’s apparent defense of his daughter’s black beauty:

...in whose sparkling and refulgent eyes  
The glorious sun did still delight to rise;  
Though he (the best judge, and most formal cause  
Of all dames’ beauties) in their firm hues draws  
Signs of his fervent’st love; and thereby shows  
That in their black the perfect’st beauty grows;  
Since the fixed colour of their curlèd hair

(Which is the highest grace of dames most fair)

No cares, no age can change, or there display

The fearful tincture of abhorred grey (99-108)

Immediately, there is ostensible praise of exterior blackness in Niger's claim. He speaks of the sun's fondness for his daughters — that "in their firm hues draws / Signs of [the sun's] fervent'st love." However, the women's black skin is not a sign of their beauty. Instead, it is an indicator of the sun's affection for them. On the contrary, the sun "shows / That in their black the perfect'st beauty grows" by the color and texture of their hair. That is, the proof that perfect beauty grows *within* their black skin (as opposed to because of) is apparent "since" (or as evidenced by) the qualities of "the fixed colour of their curled hair." Scholars have yet to gloss this line for its focus on hair texture, but it is essential to read this moment with Hall's observation in mind that "The masque specifically warns the audience not to imagine these women as actual Africans."<sup>23</sup> Here, *Othello* serves as a parallel. In Shakespeare's text, "curled" is an adjective used to describe European hair, particularly in hierarchical contradistinction to African hair. Brabantio is

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<sup>23</sup> Scholars sometimes focus on these lines' focus on the permanence of blackness. For example, Floyd-Wilson argues that "The distinctive characteristics of the Ethiopians' 'blackness' is its admirable changelessness. She glosses the subsequent lines — "...abhorred grey, / Since Death herself) herself being pale and blue) / Can never alter their most faithful hue" (108-110) — and argues that the term "Faithful"...refers simultaneously to the southerners' capacity for divine contemplation and the fixity of their blackness" (125). Andrea also focuses on the lines' notion of a permanent or unchanging blackness, although, she picks up on the masque's inconsistent approach to climate theory. She argues that "this notion of the black Other as unchanging, however attractive it might first appear, finds its motivation in the orientaling strategy Edward Said has detailed [in his *Orientalism*], in which the East remains unchanging, even moribund, and therefore subject to European appropriation. Moreover, this "droll" defense of blackness is significantly undermined in the course of the masque by an emerging racialized discourse of blackness which maintains that color inheres in the very being of an individual. The reiteration of the conventional trope of impossibility, "To blanch an Ethiop, and revive a corse," encodes this ontological sense of race even as it suggests the Sun/ King's — ideally, James's — transcendent ability to breach the bounds of nature" (272-273). I am inclined to agree with Andrea. If anything, the lines confirm that the text does not actually believe in racial transformation. Moreover, it enacts, at best, a tepid if not self-serving defense of African difference. Of course, given that Jonson is so careful to laud the actual whiteness of the nymphs' as a sign of their "highest" grace, it is difficult to call this moment a defense of blackness at all.

incredulous that his daughter would choose Othello's sooty bosom over "Venice's curled darlings." In *Blackness*, the same hierarchy is enforced. It is the nymphs' European hair — the sign of their "perfect'st beauty grow[ing]" — that is the "highest grace of dames most fair." An actual African, at least in the English's estimation, with a "fleece of woolly hair" like *Titus Andronicus*'s Aaron, would not have this "highest" grace.

In determining if the masque reserves an ability to celebrate blackness as African difference, we must do so with a comprehensive understanding of that difference in mind. Such a careful distinction between European and African bodies evinces careful attention on Jonson's part to various forms of embodied difference. It is key to remember that racism does not solely operate along the lines of skin color. In Lamar's estimation, it is a range of qualities associated with African difference that can inspire antipathy. Describing his body and dominant culture's response to it, he raps that he "Came from the bottom of mankind," that his "hair is nappy" and that his "nose is round and wide." He concludes his self-description by repeating the question "You hate me don't you?" Lamar's lines inspire important queries that we might ask of *The Masque of Blackness*. If the early modern English did not dislike African features, why go to such lengths to assert that the nymphs are beautiful because of their European features and hair? If the English were simply ambivalent about these traits, why make a point of "features" at all?

Ultimately, the masque makes explicit and strategic moves to celebrate whiteness. In many ways, this is unsurprising. After all, *Blackness* is an English production meant to aggrandize King, Queen, and country. Despite Anne's choice to have her and her ladies appear as Africans — a theme that runs immediately counter to the celebration of the "white land" of Albion — the masque at least succeeds propounding the aesthetic value of whiteness. It brings its nymphs to the English shore where they learn to wash away their blackness. As the moon

explains, the nymphs “shall [their] gentler limbs o’er-lave, / And, for [their] pains, perfection have” (302-303). Here the masque asserts unambiguously that whiteness is more beautiful than blackness. It is “perfection.” A generous reading might determine that this final move is not in itself especially racist for its time. Of course the English cast their phenotype as perfect and perceive it better than an African phenotype. Yet, it is important to note that the text is not simply in the business of casting whiteness as perfection. It is also intent on begrudging the African phenotype any unqualified beauty whatsoever. *Blackness* does not allow us to imagine the beauty of the nymphs except through their European qualities. As the text makes explicit, it is “not the colour, but the feature” that “assures” beauty. It is the color and texture of their hair that shows “That in their black the perfect’st beauty grows.” In these assertions, the text evinces a clear politics concerning African difference: black is not beautiful on an African person, because African people are not beautiful.

### **Enigmatic Tolerance**

Throughout this chapter, I have advocated for attention to early modern English culture’s vernacular understanding of African difference. Many times, a focus on such details gets lost in the search for the fascinating and idiosyncratic ways in which the early modern English conceived of ethnic difference in a world with increasing interethnic contact. But as accounts from this period continue to demonstrate, the English readily understood themselves as phenotypically distinct from Africans in relatively mundane ways.

Given the salience of vernacular understandings of African difference, I want to conclude by briefly turning to Floyd-Wilson’s examination of *Blackness*, which privileges the English’s more theoretical approaches to ethnic difference. Floyd-Wilson’s examination offers an

exhaustively researched and innovative look at the masque, convincingly arguing that Jonson's masque is a commentary in favor of James I's vision of a unified Britain. Specifically, she contends that the performance "celebrates King James's presumed capacity to civilize his subjects as he effects a peaceful union of England and Scotland" (114). Among her numerous insights, she points out that the word "blanch" — used by Jonson in the masque's description of England as the place where the sun's beams "are of force / To blanch an Ethiop" (208-209) — carried a political meaning in addition to its more conventional denotation. Where it was commonly used to describe "whitening," the term was also "a Scottish legal term" that described "the king's ability to transform a subject's debt to the crown into a ceremonial display of allegiance" (116). According to Floyd-Wilson, "the Scottish and legal valences of 'blanch' complicate the masque in a couple of ways. First, 'blanch' underscores the identification between the Ethiopian nymphs and James I's Scottish subjects.... Second, the word encourages us to associate King James's quasi-magical force with the implementation of law" (117).

Floyd-Wilson's reading brings clarity to a text that seems eager to disentangle itself from the subject of Africa. The union of England and Scotland was a major issue for James, and references in the masque to "Britania" as opposed to England show that the issue was on Jonson's mind as he wrote a masque for the King.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Jonson's repeated efforts to emphasize the whiteness of the ladies in the performance allows the text to be more pertinent to the political issue of assimilating two relatively similar cultures. Certainly, the text's culminating moment — in which the nymphs wash away their blackness — is not at all "quasi-magical"

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<sup>24</sup> Shapiro makes a similar point about Shakespeare, writing that "Shakespeare had never found an occasion to use the word 'British' before James's accession; the first time that audiences heard it in one of his plays was in *King Lear*, where it occurs three times. Similarly, the word 'Britain,' which had appeared only twice in Shakespeare's Elizabethan drama, occurs twenty-nine times in all in his Jacobean plays" (41).

when we realize that Anne and her ladies could actually just clean off their black paint.<sup>25</sup> Given this, it makes sense that the text would bespeak a much less radical transformation than the transition of black people into white people. Instead, it could reference the relatively more reasonable assimilation of culturally proximal people through the “implementation of law.”

In order to concretize a link between the Scots and Ethiopians, Floyd-Wilson raises two supporting points. First, she argues that the painted bodies of Anne and her ladies are meant to conjure notions of the ancient Picts, who historically had a practice of painting themselves. Floyd-Wilson writes that “Jonson cleverly links painting with northern identity when he has Niger contrast the natural ‘blackness’ of his daughters with those ‘painted beauties other empires sprung’ (113) who, it turns out, reign only in Britannia.” At least in part, she believes that the use of paint is meant “to conjure up images of Scotland’s barbaric past” (122). Second, she points out that for some early modern thinkers, the Scottish were genealogically tied to Africa. According to Floyd-Wilson, “Scottish myths held that Gathelus, a Greek Lord, had met and married Scotia, an Egyptian, and together they settled in Scotland” (123). This second explanation goes a long way in explaining the masque’s otherwise opaque moment in which the Nymphs display fans to the audience, some of which are inscribed with a “hieroglyphic” (220-224). The fact that the women onstage represent Ethiopians instead of Egyptians makes some sense, given that Jonson notes that “the Egyptians are said first to have brought [such symbols] from the Ethiopians” (224). This genealogy places the Scottish in a lineage of ancient wisdom that would make them appear less barbarous and thus suitable for political and cultural merger with the English. Thus, the

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<sup>25</sup> The fact that the women were actually white seems to enable Jonson’s humoral conceit of racial mutability. If the women were actually black, Aaron’s supposition from *Titus Andronicus* that his skin color can never be washed away would instead apply. After defending his skin color by arguing that “Coal-black is better than another hue, / In that it scorns to bear another hue” (4.2.98-99), the Moor asserts that “all the water in the ocean / Can never turn the swan’s black legs to white” (4.2.100-101).

“‘real point’ of *The Masque of Blackness* may not be the deferred transformation of the Ethiopians’ skin, but the presentation of a genealogy of people who transmitted southern wisdom and culture to a region that eventually granted them external whiteness” (Floyd-Wilson 124).

In part, it is Jonson’s privileging of “southern wisdom” that leads Floyd-Wilson to argue that “blackness — both symbolically and humorally — plays an astonishingly positive role in the masque’s vision of Britannia’s past and future” (114). Where Scottish people appeared particularly brutish to many early modern English, Floyd-Wilson contends that the association Jonson draws between them and Africa was meant to make them appear more favorably: “if we take seriously the implicit connection between Scotland and ancient Africa, the Scots’ status as stereotypical northerners becomes much less certain in Jonson’s framework” (124). Given that her argument seeks to show how African qualities might have factored positively in England, Floyd-Wilson judiciously gives credence to the masque’s more problematic aspects. She concludes by writing that “in its denigration of outer blackness and appropriation of internal blackness, *The Masque of Blackness* captures British identity in transition. And by deliberately fashioning ‘whiteness’ as the shared and temperate complexion of all the inhabitants of Britannia, Jonson succeeds in forecasting the eventual construction of racialism” (131). Despite the indispensability of Floyd-Wilson’s investigation of *Blackness* to the field and indeed to this chapter, this last assertion — that Jonson only “forecast[s] the eventual construction of racialism” — requires deeper investigation.

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that deferrals like Floyd-Wilson’s — in which the early modern English are imagined to have anticipated racism rather than engaged in it — risk eliding the early modern English capacity to employ nuanced modes of anti-blackness. And certainly, Jonson works carefully and strategically to avoid celebrating phenotypic African

difference. It is important to note that Floyd-Wilson is aware that the text disparages “outer blackness” in an attempt to emphasize that whiteness is the “shared” phenotype between the Scottish and the English. Of course, if it is evident that *Blackness* is antipathetic to the African phenotype, the disagreement here is whether or not the text’s “denigration of outer blackness” is racist or merely anticipates racism. It goes without saying that I am convinced of the former. It seems starkly more plausible that Jonson represented his culture’s present biases in the masque as opposed to predicting some future period’s anti-blackness.

But Floyd-Wilson’s careful examination raises other points that suggest some capacity for racial tolerance on Jonson’s part. If Jonson did find atavistic African wisdom admirable, does such an orientation disentangle *Blackness* from participating in racism? Moreover, what do we make of Jonson’s purported esteem for “southern wisdom” with respect to the early modern nexus of anti-black racism?

Lamar considers the roots of white antipathy toward blackness, rapping: “You hate me don’t you? / You hate me just as much as you hate yourself / Jealous of my wisdom and cards I dealt.” For Lamar, there are two roots of anti-blackness that are pertinent to considering Jonson’s perspective. The first is a white self-hatred that mirrors anti-blackness, approximated by Floyd-Wilson’s identification of the masque’s “implicit appeals to early modern ethnology, which maintained that white northern complexions were in humoral terms as intemperate and barbaric as the burnt completions of Ethiopia” (118). And the second is a jealousy of “wisdom,” one that mirrors the masque’s attempt, in Floyd-Wilson’s view, to claim an African genealogy of “southern wisdom” for the British Isles. Lamar’s verse is an important reminder that an unfavorable view of the self does not often lead to the acceptance of others. With respect to *Blackness*, Jonson’s purported recognition of a stereotypical lack of northern wisdom does not



encourage any noticeable tolerance. If anything, what we might mark as that tolerance — a desire for African “wisdom” — informs a text that finds a particularly opaque way to celebrate an African quality, specifically through the disparagement of the black body.

All of that said, even if we accept that there is some kernel of noteworthy tolerance that is concealed by Jonson’s more conspicuous denigration of the African phenotype, it would not have been one that was readily available to his audience. As Floyd-Wilson admits, “we must acknowledge that the shocking effect of the ladies’ painted blackness may have blinded the court audience to Jonson’s more enigmatic messages” (120). This caveat is crucial. One of the many immensely valuable aspects of Floyd-Wilson’s investigation of *Blackness* is its elucidation of Jonson’s more individual aims. But these idiosyncrasies are much less valuable for understanding early modern perspectives that ran counter to racism if, in fact, they would have proven obscure to their intended early modern audience.

We have encountered one of those blinded audience members in Carleton. His claim that “you cannot imagine a more ugly Sight, than a Troop of lean-cheek’d Moors” privileges attention to the observable. For all of the meaning that the courtier missed in the performance, his immediate reaction to *Blackness* evinces two important things. The first is a straightforward, vernacular understanding of the physical disparity between African and European people. And the second is the irreconcilability of that difference. What is off-putting to Carleton is the combination of European “lean-cheek[s]” and dark skin.

It would have been equally difficult for most Scots to invest in the oblique suggestion that they had worthwhile genealogical ties to Ethiopia. As Floyd-Wilson explains, Jonson championed that notion in large part from his own capacious knowledge. While there was a circulating myth that the Scottish had some Egyptian lineage, Floyd-Wilson notes that, in his use

of hieroglyphic, “Jonson also implies (in his characteristically *erudite* way) that the proper origin of these southern ancestors should be Ethiopian rather than Egyptian” (123, emphasis mine). Such an observation is indispensable for getting to the root of Jonson’s authorial idiosyncrasies. But Jonson’s individual assertion of a Scottish-Ethiopian lineage probably had little noticeable impact on early modern routines of anti-blackness.

Further, Jonson’s cryptic linking of Scottish and Ethiopian culture does not accurately reflect the ways in which most Scots would have historically approached Africans. For that, we might return to William Dunbar, who, for having the privilege of spending time around a woman from the culture that Jonson imagined the Scottish owed their wisdom to, produced a condescending and racist poem that compared her face to a monkey’s. Dunbar’s crude observations mirror Carleton’s in their fixation with immediately observable difference. It is important to note that these two men share a sense of African bodies as fundamentally distinct from their own. In this, their whiteness — as defined against African difference — represents common ground for the English and the Scottish. Again, Jonson’s skill at moving along different registers — from the esoteric to the pedestrian — is on full display in *Blackness*. His text anticipates the predictable, visceral reactions of the court, and moves in step with it by expressly denigrating the African phenotype as a way to emphasize that the Scottish and the English were phenotypically similar. Given Dunbar and Carleton’s basic observations, we might recognize that is not so much that Jonson “*fashion[s]* ‘whiteness’ as the shared and temperate complexion of all the inhabitants of Britannia” (Floyd-Wilson 131, emphasis mine). Rather, Jonson capitalizes on the simple cultural understanding that the Scottish and the English were one in their observable racial distinction from African people. The difference between instating a notion of shared

whiteness and working with such an existing notion is, of course, the difference between anticipating racism and perpetuating racism.

Given that Jonson's text is in large part about nation-making, it is worth considering it in relation to broader discussions of race and nation. The text's literal white-washing, along with its corresponding celebration of whiteness as the shared phenotype of the Scottish and the English, bespeaks its participation in some version of modern state formation. In *Blackness*, the figure of the African works to unify two relatively similar yet different white cultures as belonging to one nation. David Theo Goldberg offers a helpful paradigm concerning just such a procedure, writing that the "power of delimitation through exclusion, and of empowerment through inclusion, interactively definitive of the modern state and its degree of self-determination, offers the artifice of internal homogeneity to a state's population. Here race and nation are defined in terms of each other in the interests of producing the picture of a coherent populace in the face of potentially divisive heterogeneity" (10). Given *Blackness*'s participation in such a process, it is no surprise that it is difficult to locate any overt acceptance of the African other. As Jon Stratton and Ien Ang explain, even the problematic paradigm of multiculturalism, which more often than not fails to successfully value racial and cultural difference, does not function alongside this form of state formation.<sup>26</sup> Instead, such an attempt at racial acceptance — however unsuccessful — represents the breakdown of such a project. As they write, "multiculturalism could be understood as the consequence of the failure of the modern project of the nation-state, which emphasized unity and sameness — a trope of identity — over difference and diversity...multiculturalism valorizes diversity where the classic modern nation-state valorized homogeneity" (138). And indeed, if we cannot even call Jonson's more positive approaches to blackness multicultural — a term that,

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<sup>26</sup> I discuss the failure of multiculturalism in the previous chapter, along with what Goldberg refers to as the "uncritical celebration of the multicultural" (6) that is a function of dominant culture.

despite its optimistic connotations, more often identifies a failure of egalitarian interethnicity — how do we articulate the obscure celebration of Ethiopia that is barely apparent in *Blackness*, particularly when, at best, this celebration admittedly enacts an appropriative cultural plundering? Certainly, such a mode of tolerance remains an oddity until we can name it and, more importantly, demonstrate its ability to effectively counteract more apparent and pervasive anti-blackness.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Titus Andronicus: Making Much of the Mulatto*

Thus far, I have argued that phenotypic blackness presented a perennial problem for the early modern English, one that manifested on the stage in both overt and subtle forms of anti-blackness. *Othello* provides perhaps the most prominent example. Despite his utility to the Venetian state, the Moor's "thicklips" (1.1.66) and "sooty bosom" (1.2.71) offer incontrovertible points of derision in the play. The case of Peele's *Alcazar* further demonstrates the antipathy that the English held for African difference. It dramatizes the defeat of a "negro Moor" whose black skin is evidence of his "bloody deeds." *Alcazar* also shows how careful the English could be when abiding anti-black proclivities. In staging the historic battle of Ksar El-Kebir, which primarily took place between two groups of Moors, the play contravenes its source text and fashions the battle's losers as a homogenous, black-skinned group. Further, it markedly downplays evidence of the heroic side's ethnic difference, and it finds occasion to laud its heroes for destroying the opposing "negro" cohort. Jonson's *Masque of Blackness* fares no better in accepting African difference, even while it spends most of its time thinking favorably about the African nymphs played by Queen Anne and her ladies. The text pays studied attention to black "features," and it is careful to point out that the women onstage are beautiful because they lack these qualities. The text's opening is clear that black skin is an impediment to beauty that only the women's European qualities can overcome. It asserts that the women are "bright" even though they are "but black in face," and it reminds its audience that the women stand as proof "that beauty best, / Which not the colour, but the feature / Assures unto the creature" (71-72).

Despite each of these texts' nuanced strategies for rendering verbal and physical assaults on the black body in attempts to concretize a racial hierarchy between white and black people, the aforementioned plays operate with the relatively straightforward attention to physical difference that generally subtends anti-black ideology. In short, they are ultimately binaristic in their approach to race. Othello is described in contradistinction to the Venetians. In Iago's contemptuous vision, he is the "black ram" where Desdemona is the "white ewe." This distinction ultimately marks the Moor out for a form of contempt that "Venice's curled darlings" would never invite. Both Peele and Jonson's texts adhere to this logic, even while they work with less binaristic subject matter. Peele takes a historic battle that pitted somatically variegated factions of Moors against one another, and he bifurcates the heroes and villains racially, evacuating the Africanized traits of the heroic faction and wholesaling the enemy as a cohort of negroes. Peele crafts a fiction out of a real event to abide early modern anti-blackness. Jonson, by contrast, takes the fictive scenario of African nymphs traveling to England and plays up facts to similar effect. His careful references to the nymphs remind the audience that the "perfect'st beauty" only "grows in their black" because they are truly white women. Throughout, Jonson's text communicates that black skin could not be beautiful on an actual African person, because African people are not beautiful. While Peele and Jonson deal with ostensibly muddled racial distinctions, they are still able to rely on essentialist principles.

That said, not every early modern rendering of racial blackness fits comfortably within this essentialist schema. When considered through explorations of racial mixing — in which a black and white character consummate a relationship and produce a child — African difference ultimately resisted binaristic routines of early modern racialism. That is not to say the topic was not used for racialist purposes or did not inspire especially racialist reactions. On the contrary,

renderings of racial mixing often served precisely this function in early modern culture. As the embodied manifestation of early modern English fears of cultural infiltration, interracial sex and the offspring thereby produced attracted urgent interest and spurred extreme hypotheses. But as I demonstrate in this chapter, the topic fails to maintain the pejorative associations it conjures.

The clear racial lines drawn in the binary between characters like Muly Mahamet and Abdelmelec enable the former's blackness to loom as a threat to the latter's Europeanized civility. In the racist logic that subtends a text like *Alcazar*, racial mixing comprises the realization of such a threat. Thus, in staging racial mixing, the onus shifts from proposing a peril to rendering its disastrous aftermath. Of course, such racist fears float exaggerated claims. So while bringing racial mixing to the stage would immediately signal as deeply consequential, the rendering was hard pressed to live up to such claims. Ultimately, early modern English concerns about African difference were more impactful when rendered as potential threats, because interethnic relations, in practice, were not inherently cataclysmic.

Perhaps for this reason, racial mixing is a topic that is only engaged tangentially in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, with Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* being the lone exception.<sup>1</sup> Near the conclusion of the Roman tragedy, something of an innovation occurs. Aaron the Moor and Tamora the Gothic Empress produce a child, specifically "the only child of an interracial couple that we actually see on the early modern stage in England" (Loomba 52). Soon after this child appears, Aaron makes a claim that only deepens the play's conception of interracialism.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Caliban's racial background may very well be mixed, but *The Tempest* is not explicit on the matter. He is described by Shakespeare as "freckled whelp" (1.2.285) with an African mother and an unknown father. *The Merchant of Venice* mentions a mixed race pregnancy, but its interest in the topic amounts to a brief exchange between Lancelot and Lorenzo, in which Lancelot is accused of "getting up the Negro's belly" (3.5.32).

<sup>2</sup> Interracialism is a scholarly approximate for the phrase "racial mixing." See Sollors, *Interracialism*. This chapter avoids using the term miscegenation because of its racist etymological history, which I outline in the fourth section.

He tells of another mixed race infant, this one with a complexion so light that it can be mistaken for a pale-skinned Goth.<sup>3</sup> These renderings are surprising, given that in contemporaneous accounts of early modern England, interracial relationships and mixed race children do not appear to factor prominently.<sup>4</sup>

Literary scholars have yet to place *Titus*'s racial mixing in a broader critical and historical discussion of the topic.<sup>5</sup> Instead, they tend to enumerate the literary function of the play's interracial relationships and mixed offspring. Ostensibly, this is perhaps the most germane disciplinary inroad to engage this aspect of the play. Such an approach relies upon the rich fodder that *Titus* offers for such analysis. For example, Shakespeare's first tragedy is often seen as a play of excess. It stands apart from the playwright's more nuanced works in its repeated depictions of outrageous and disturbing violence.<sup>6</sup> It is easy to see something as ostensibly extreme as the play's relatively comprehensive focus on mixedness as a function of this heavy-handedness. *Othello*, a critical favorite and Shakespeare's most famous play concerning an interracial couple, leaves open the possibility that Othello and Desdemona never actually consummate their marriage. *Titus*, on the other hand, gives us two interracial pairings, both of which produce children.

Apart from the play's penchant for the extreme, *Titus* also offers a compelling set of themes that appear to correlate with interracialism. The play appeals to the arbitrary nature of

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<sup>3</sup> Royster brings the concept of "passing" to bear on *Titus* in "White-Limed Walls."

<sup>4</sup> Best's 1578 account from his *True Discourse* of seeing a mixed family in England stands out as the most famous example from the period.

<sup>5</sup> Royster's article is one exception. Her fascinating look at Andrew Battel's early modern account of his travels to Angola, during which he encountered "Dondos," or "white children born of black parents" (451), stands out as fascinating historical inquiry into the nature of *Titus*'s light-skinned, mixed race infant.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Smith sees much criticism of *Titus* as rehearsing a "tedious restatement of the bloody revenge tragedy theme." Many views of the play, he continues, see it "as debased, melodramatic, questionably Shakespearean transposition of Seneca" (45).



categorical boundaries by worrying the line between the civilized Romans and the barbaric Goths. It also expounds both the danger and the inevitability of intercultural alliances: in many ways, Saturninus's marriage to Tamora amplifies Rome's governmental chaos, yet Lucius's alliance with the Gothic army is presented as the play's only recourse to reinstate order. As the play forms and reforms the Roman state, we are invited to consider the consequences of these various intercultural relations. The appearance of interracial relationships and mixed race children appears to amplify these overarching themes.

Yet as appropriate as these correlations seem, given both the novelty of *Titus's* interracialism and its ostensible conformity to the play's major motifs, such connections rely upon a predictable and inaccurate method for approaching racial mixing. Shakespeare's first tragedy takes part in a tradition of presenting interracialism as culturally consequential — if not thematically central — as does criticism that reinforces the playwright's rendering.<sup>7</sup> While the vast majority of all racial mixing is unremarkable, early modern and modern-day observers of interracial relationships and mixed race people often point to the newness and significance of interracialism, suggesting that such mixing carries the potential for great cultural and demographic shifts. As I demonstrate, despite Shakespeare's attempts, the subject of interracialism proves to be of little significance to the overall plot, even while some critics still overestimate the topic's consequentiality.

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<sup>7</sup> Although I do not engage with it in this chapter, the tragic mulatto trope carries a long history of misrepresentation and inaccurate reception, particularly in relation to thematics. Fabi, whose *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel* recuperates the value of pre-Harlem Renaissance black literature, points out the myopic but pervasive approach to the theme of mixedness in relation to 19th-century American literature. She argues that “a white-dominated academic establishment” remains “mostly familiar with white literary stereotypes of the tragic mulatto as neither black nor white, an ill-fated in-between figure who was nevertheless somewhat ‘better’ than blacks because supposedly genetically closer to whites” (2).

The persistence of such a perspective — which is not just notable in early modern texts like *Titus* but also thrives through dominant, post-racial predilections in the contemporary moment — signals a pervasive misapprehension of how racial mixing occurs and how it impacts a culture. Indeed, how accurately can a topic be engaged with if, in one form or another, it has been considered a new and culturally impactful concern for at least 400 years? The prevailing notion that interracialism is novel contravenes the reality that it has a sustained history, and the supposition that such mixing is impactful suggests that if such a history existed, it would be accompanied by some watershed cultural event. In order to begin to answer the more compelling historical questions raised by *Titus*'s pronounced engagement with interracialism, we must first consider the special case that racial mixing presents to both the early modern and the post-racial consciousness.

By looking at the misinterpretations of racial mixing that the early modern period shares with the contemporary moment, particularly the American post-racial moment, this chapter aims to broaden our understanding of racial mixing in the early modern period.<sup>8</sup> I argue that pervasive myths about the topic provide an incorrect and myopic view of how and where mixing occurs and how such mixing relates to the dominant culture. By analyzing our own post-racial proclivities concerning the topic — specifically those that elide a broader historical view — we can better assess the manner in which an inaccurate mythos of interracialism circulates in the early modern period. Inasmuch as this mythos is at work in *Titus*, I argue that by delineating its workings, we can revise our orientation to the play's use of mixedness. Instead of focusing on how the play's racial mixing emphasizes certain themes, we can see how it actually obscures a more comprehensive view of cultural concerns pertinent to the text and to early modern culture.

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<sup>8</sup> My focus on black and white interracialism is by no means a complete representation of racial mixing in the United States. See Brennan's introduction for a more inclusive gloss of the topic.

Seeing the mechanisms through which our own culture's comprehensive history of interracialism is so often mitigated enables us to recognize how similarly complex early modern histories remain underacknowledged. The concern is two-fold. First, Shakespeare — and many early modern thinkers — operate within a mythos of racial mixing that inherently elides a broader understanding of the topic. Overwhelmingly, interracialism is presented as a novel and culturally consequential concern in the period despite its actual ubiquity and inconsequentiality. But second, because our own culture operates under similar misconceptions, these early modern approaches appear to offer a genuine representation of their cultures interracialism. In short, because we believe — against all evidence — that racial mixing is relatively new today, we assume that early modern interracialism — especially when it is presented to us as novel — is a true aberration, a manifestation so out-of-place and out-of-time that it might even be entirely fictive.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the historical span of racial mixing is not just obscured by a particular manner of representation, it is also subject to a cycle of representation and reception that erodes its sustained history.<sup>10</sup>

Shakespeare's England was a place — not unlike our own — in which racial mixing proliferated in myriad ways.<sup>11</sup> This reality is evident even in Shakespeare's fictive representation of the topic, despite the playwright's various attempts to capitalize on its automatic associations with the extraordinary. As such, my analysis begins by troubling the correlation between *Titus's*

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<sup>9</sup> Loomba writes that “critics have often assumed that Aaron fabricates his story” of a mixed baby that passes (68).

<sup>10</sup> This notion of a cycle of representation and reception concerning racial mixing is reminiscent of E. Smith's claim about racism in *Othello*. She writes: “racism is ‘institutional’ in *Othello*... it is and has been a foundational tenet of its writing and its ongoing reception, an enabling condition of its creation and reproduction” (17).

<sup>11</sup> As I discuss later, we must weigh Best's anecdote about seeing the child of a black man and a white English woman with Elizabethan baptismal records that show mixed children with white fathers being born to enslaved black women. One wonders what happened to all of these mixed children. But — as the American example demonstrates — once mixed children have children of their own, some of them inevitably pass into white culture, and the certainty of “racial purity” goes out the window.

overarching themes of cultural and categorical instability and its employment of interracialism, demonstrating that the racial component of Tamora and Aaron's relationship is one of its least relevant aspects in relation to the play's major happenings.

In the following section, I bring the post-racial perspective to bear on early modern approaches to the topic. I draw from the problems of the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century American Multicultural Movement, which mobilized the concept of racial mixing in order to challenge predominant notions of race, to reread early modern English approaches to interracialism. In both the modern-day and early modern examples, racial mixing is imagined as the catalyst for a consequential cultural shift. But such a stance necessarily elides the fact that racial mixing has a long history, one that overwhelmingly shows mixing to be incapable of enacting such a shift. I read *Titus*'s more negative approach alongside Edward Herbert's early modern poem "Brown Beauty," which imagines that racial mixing creates perfection, to demonstrate how both optimistic and pessimistic views of racial mixing can perpetuate the same erasure.

The next section builds on my investigation of these procedures by engaging those manifestations of racial mixing that are most susceptible to erasure: regimes of sexual violence perpetrated against enslaved black women by white men. This particular elision is shared between early modern and American culture, and I raise it both to complicate the prevalent historical gaze and to emphasize the complicity of popular approaches to racial mixing with the needs of a dominant culture, here defined in both the American and early modern English context as white, male dominated culture.

The final section of this chapter reengages *Titus*. It compasses the play's unsatisfying ending, in which Rome's disastrous incorporation of Tamora's Gothic cohort is purportedly ameliorated by the invasion of the Gothic army led by Lucius Andronicus. Shakespeare

strategically reemphasizes black and white racial mixing at the play's conclusion in what I read as a tellingly transparent attempt at minimizing the cultural disjunctures between the Gothic and Roman cultures. While the unification of the Romans and Goths is overtly imperfect, raising the interracial union between Tamora and Aaron appears to make it less problematic. The use of racial mixing to obscure more complex questions of cultural organization is further demonstrated by the way in which Shakespeare reintroduces the topic. He places that responsibility in the hands of Marcus Andronicus, a character whose political alignment to the hypocritical Lucius Andronicus is anything but beyond reproach. In light of a more critical understanding of the dominant approach to racial mixing, Marcus's otherwise abrupt gloss of interracialism appears aimed at downplaying the Andronicii's deeply unethical reorganization of the Roman state.

### **Played Out "Experiments"**

As I argue above, scholarly approaches to Shakespeare's first tragedy often link the play's interracialism to its concerns with cultural and categorical disruption. Francesca T. Royster, who refers to Aaron and Tamora's relationship as "a kind of enhanced miscegenation" (432), argues that "the black baby born to a white empress would have been unsettling" (451). The child, she contends, embodies a "sign of Tamora's sexual deviancy and Aaron's seductiveness [that] also stands in for the foreign that perennially threatened Rome" (449). John Gillies takes such a perspective even further, contending that the "begetting of a 'blackamoor child' upon the Roman empress" represents "the very excess of [Aaron's] outrageousness" (112). He aligns the child with "the hybrid or the monstrous in classical tragedy" (110), surmising that it is "a living sign of the pollution of the Roman body-politic" (110).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting here that the term "monstrous" is a poor way to discuss what is foremost in the world of the play a human child. Other scholarship on *Titus* has also been somewhat insensitive to the topic of

In part, these estimations draw from Tamora and Aaron's pronounced ability to emphasize and thrive upon the arbitrariness of ostensibly clear categorical boundaries. As Katherine Eisaman Maus argues, "the characters best equipped to function in this world of collapsing distinctions are Aaron and Tamora" (404). And although Maus also sees their relationship as an apex of cultural and categorical disruption, the characters certainly worry these lines as individuals.<sup>13</sup> Most immediately, each of them works to blur the line between civility and barbarism. On the surface, both are simply Rome's enemies, quick to turn to unabashed and barbarous cruelty against an otherwise peaceful society. But upon a closer look, the two lovers undermine the very same categorization that they emphasize. Aaron the malignant Moor plots the events that all but ruin the Andronicii, and by extension Rome; yet, his fatherly devotion to his newborn child throws into relief the brutal filicides committed in the play by Titus Andronicus. Tamara also makes Rome's self-proclaimed civility appear like an especially hypocritical assessment.<sup>14</sup> After she unsuccessfully pleads for Titus to halt his cruel and unnecessary ritual sacrifice of her son, it is difficult to invest in the idea that Shakespeare's Rome is a place with stellar ethics.

Critical attention to race and ethnicity in early modern studies demonstrates that Aaron and Tamora both emphasize and also greatly trouble the line between self and "other." Royster's work, in particular, demonstrates the extremity of the pair's physical difference. She notes not just the "coal-blackness" of Aaron but also the "hyper-whiteness" of Tamora and her Gothic compatriots (432). Even if we lose track of the three phenotypes that commingle in

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interracialism. Bartels — whose investigation of the play is, in general, incredibly elucidative — uses the term "interbreeding" (81), which, with its animalistic implication, is similarly problematic.

<sup>13</sup> Maus argues that "their relationship is perhaps *the most obvious* example of the play's tendency to juxtapose opposites that turn out to have a great deal in common" (404, emphasis mine).

<sup>14</sup> For example, Marcus Andronicus reminds Titus: "Thou art a Roman; be not barbarous" (1.1.375).

Shakespeare's Rome — the Gothic paleness, the Roman's bronze complexion, and the Moorish blackness — Aaron's dark skin is simply jarring amid the whiteness of both the Roman and Gothic characters.<sup>15</sup>

Skin color is a visual and literary cue in *Titus* for intransigent difference. Early modern culture's waning mode of thinking through phenotypic variance in humoral terms — particularly by imagining that one's skin color could shift depending on their northern or southern location — is nowhere to be found in the play.<sup>16</sup> Aaron's boast that "Coal-black is better than another hue, / In that it scorns to bear another hue" (4.2.98-99) rests in an understanding that his skin color is immutable. His subsequent example — that "*all* the water in the ocean / Can never turn the swan's black legs to white" (4.2.100-101, emphasis mine) — defines that immutability in the most essentialist terms.<sup>17</sup> Aaron's certain racial difference correlates directly to his role as a villain in the text. His declaration that he will "have his soul black like his face" (5.3.120) draws strong parallels with *Alcazar*'s description of Muly Mahamet, who is "black in his look and bloody in his deeds" (1.Prol.16).<sup>18</sup> The rendering is nearly as blunt in its racism as Peele's strict anti-blackness. Aaron plays to the early modern notion that phenotypic blackness evinced evil qualities, and his malignant actions against the Roman state confirm claims in the play that he is a "barbarous" (2.3.78) and "irreligious" Moor (5.3.120). Such behavior informs Roman anti-black sentiments, like those of Marcus Andronicus, who wishes violence on Aaron's black body with a cheap metaphor about killing an insect for being "a black ill-favor'd fly, / Like to the

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<sup>15</sup> See Little's *Shakespeare Jungle Fever*, 25-27. He gives a thoughtful reading of Henry Peacham's well-known c. 1595 drawing of the play, in which Aaron is rendered startlingly dark amid a collection of white characters.

<sup>16</sup> For a thorough examination of geohumoralism, see Floyd-Wilson.

<sup>17</sup> We might think of Aaron's assertion as the factual counterpoint to Jonson's fantastical rendering in *Blackness*, where the nymphs are instructed to wash away their black skin.

<sup>18</sup> As I note in my chapter on *Alcazar*, Peele is believed to have collaborated with Shakespeare on *Titus*.

empress' Moor" (4.1.66-67). In this, the Romans participate in a racism that is a feature of early modern dramatic staging of Moors.

But in the nexus of difference that is a feature of Shakespeare's Rome, Aaron is not the only character who is culturally distinct from the Romans. The barbarous Goths, namely Tamora, Chiron, and Demetrius, represent Rome's other other, and they are just as villainous. There is an almost feasible interethnicity in the alliance between Aaron and the Gothic royalty. Shakespeare embeds his decidedly black character into a cohort of "hyper-whiteness" (Royster 432). Aaron's membership to this royal family of Goths is never genuinely questioned or elaborated on.<sup>19</sup> His presence is unusual, but it is dealt with in such a way — which is to say not dealt with at all — that it begins to seem natural. Before we can ask where Aaron hails from and how he belongs to these white people, *Titus* is already running full speed ahead, as though the question itself is superfluous.

Where Aaron's simple presence raises and tacitly refutes the boundary between racial insider and outsider, Tamora's actions propose that cultural insertion is seamless. She initially appears in the play's first scene as the queen of the defeated Goths and a prisoner of Rome, but by the end of that same scene, she accepts the marriage proposal of Rome's new emperor. Upon consenting to the marriage, she proclaims herself "incorporate in Rome, / A Roman now adopted happily" (1.1.459-460). However, this notion of happy cultural merger soon collapses. Tamora uses her new position to bring chaos to the very same culture in which she claims new membership. This failure of cultural incorporation is a nightmarish presage to the play's

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<sup>19</sup> Bartels makes an interesting point relevant to Aaron's presumed membership to the Gothic cohort, writing that "To see [Aaron] for what he is here, the opening act suggests, we must first see Rome for what it is: a place where the crossing of cultures is not the exception but the rule" (70).



conclusion, in which Lucius and Marcus attempt to pass off a large-scale union between the Gothic and Roman people.

All of that said, the sexual relationship between the pair is often privileged as the play's most startling and consequential cultural disruption. To many, their romantic entanglement typifies if not establishes the play's broader challenge to and reconstruction of Rome's cultural composition. *Titus* works to endorse this function. Lavinia and Bassianus react to the pair's adultery in a way that foregrounds the issue of ethnic difference. After happening upon the villains' tryst, Bassianus warns Tamora that the "swarth Cimmerian / Doth make [her] honour of his body's hue, / Spotted, detested, and abominable" (2.3.72-74). Lavinia echoes this point of derision, mockingly telling Tamora to "joy her raven-colour'd love" (2.3.83). The avenues enabled by the racial dynamic — a compass of pollution, disgust, and contemptibility — create a diatribe against infidelity that is inextricable from the rhetoric focused on racial mixing.

However, close attention to this scene shows that the topic of interracialism detracts from rather than informs more pertinent plot concerns. Lavinia and Bassianus's derision lead them away from acknowledging that Tamora and Aaron are orchestrating the plan that will leave Rome's leadership in chaos, the far more relevant purpose of the villains' meeting. Bassianus notes that "foul desire" has "conducted" the pair (2.3.79), vividly depicting the terms of that desire in racialized rhetoric that juxtaposes Saturninus' "snow-white, goodl[iness]" to Aaron's "detested" black skin (2.3.76; 2.3.74). But his vituperative rant produces the wrong conclusion. Lust certainly exists between the pair, but it is foremost a desire for vengeance that has "conducted" the two to the woods. As Aaron explains his excited state to Tamora just before they are interrupted: "these are no venereal signs: / Vengeance is in my heart, death in my hand, / Blood and revenge are hammering in my head" (2.3.37-39).

The interracial sex in this scene would undoubtedly have registered as transgressive to an early modern audience, and not simply because it was adulterous. Lavinia and Bassianus's extended diatribe suggests that Shakespeare hoped to capitalize on this discomfort. Aversion to racial mixing persists throughout Shakespeare's tenure. Later in his career, the playwright finds no shortage of avenues through which to criticize the interracial relationship between Othello and Desdemona.<sup>20</sup> That said, *Titus*'s interracial tryst fails to work in-step with any of the play's essential occurrences. It dominates the scene, but it is effectively superfluous. The subsequent murders, mutilations, and sexual assault enacted by the villainous pair push the state to such a cataclysmic civil fracture — not to mention, instigate a comparatively grotesque sequence of vengeance from *Titus Andronicus* — that it is left with no choice but to unite with its most recent foreign enemy.

Indeed, with this new scrutiny, we might better ask: what does the racial component of the sexual relationship between the pair actually *do*? If, as Gillies argues, the product of Aaron and Tamora's relationship is "a living sign of the pollution of the Roman body-politic," why does Bassianus's similar contention — that the sexual contact between a black and a white body has made Tamora's honor "spotted, detested, and abominable" — collapse under scrutiny?

As I demonstrate in the next section, interracialism is so often automatically seen as a consequential issue that it is rarely tested against that association. Indeed, in so much as Tamora and Aaron serve to disrupt clear delineations between hero and villain or civilized and savage, and in so much as those disruptions act as a foil for the amorality inherent to the cultural chaos that ensues in Shakespeare's Rome, their interracial relationship is not the primary location to expound upon such a paradigm.

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<sup>20</sup> As I discuss in this project's first chapter, Othello and Desdemona's relationship is derided by characters like Iago, Roderigo, Brabantio, and Emilia.

This is not to say that Gillies's presumption is entirely misplaced. As already noted, Shakespeare makes much of the perfunctory correlations between interracial pairing and cultural contamination. Conceits that employ imagery of "spotted" honor and "raven colour'd" relations work within the nexus of early modern fears of cultural infiltration. As this project's discussion of *The Masque of Blackness* demonstrates, anxieties about the transmission of phenotypic qualities are strikingly demonstrated by Dudley Carleton's preoccupation with the black paint of the masquers and its propensity to mark other bodies at court.

When pressed for more, Lavinia and Bassianus's sentiments offer only a convincing hyperbole. Take Lavinia's capitalization on the perennial correlation of racial mixing as inherently novel and consequential. Her suggestion that the Gothic Queen and her Moorish paramour are "singled forth to try experiments" (2.3.69) is fraught with meaning. More than suggesting that the pair is alone, the phrase "singled forth" asserts the abnormality of the villains' activity. The word "experiments" — which, in the early modern vernacular, held the recognizable denotation of undertaking an activity to "discover something unknown" (OED) — emphasizes this point and draws attention to interracial sex as an untested practice.<sup>21</sup> The term "experiment" appears only five times in Shakespeare's dramatic canon. And if Owen Glendower's usage of it in *1 Henry IV* is any indication — he claims that no man can "hold [him] pace in deep *experiments*" (3.1.47, emphasis mine) after insisting that at his birth "the front of heaven was full of fiery shapes, / The goats ran from the mountains, and the herds / Were

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<sup>21</sup> The OED shows that, particularly in the scientific sense, the word experiment — defined as "An action or operation undertaken in order to discover something unknown, to test a hypothesis, or establish or illustrate some known truth" — reaches back as far as 1362.

strangely clamorous to the frightened fields” (3.1.36-38) — there is also something of the mystical for Shakespeare in its meaning.<sup>22</sup>

Lavinia’s criticisms, then, point to something in Aaron and Tamora’s sexual relationship that is both deeply consequential and particularly rare. But this popular response to racial mixing collapses upon any extended engagement with the history of interracialism. Shakespeare’s attempt to utilize the range of mixedness’s ostensibly striking qualities — like racial passing — lead him to include a discussion of a light-skinned, mixed race child in the play. But in doing so, racial mixing, in fact, loses its status as aberrant.

In some sense, Shakespeare is working within a literary tradition that used relationships between black men and white women to depict breaches to cultural norms. As Lynda E. Boose argues, “the black man-white woman narrative was still flourishing in drama, in epic, and in pastoral as the epitome of the romantically transgressive story” (42). She reaches as far back as the medieval Charlemagne Romances, known in pre-modern England as *Otuel*.<sup>23</sup> Considering this tradition, Aaron and Tamora’s relationship might more accurately be thought of as somewhat conventional. Although it was played for its shock value, the theme more accurately appears played out upon closer inspection.

Against this backdrop, Lavinia and Bassianus’s words appear more provocative than anything. Although they convincingly raise the issue of interracialism as something untested and unequivocally pollutive, examples from within *Titus* and from early modern culture undermine those associations. In this way, Shakespeare’s interracialism stands at an uneasy crossroad: it

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<sup>22</sup> Other than *Titus* and *1 Henry IV*, the word also appears in *All’s Well That Ends Well*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *Much Ado about Nothing*.

<sup>23</sup> See Boose, 42.

seems in so many ways to be consequential, yet in terms of the play's larger themes, it mostly offers a critical dead-end.

When pressured, the play seems at pains to float the correlations between interracialism and the Roman state's cultural crisis. But without this pressure, the association between racial mixing and the sudden cultural reorganization of the Roman state appears more than just germane: the topic seems to encapsulate the crisis at the center of the play. As the next section shows, this push and pull is endemic to the topic of racial mixing. Popular and historically recurrent approaches see the concern as a new and notable one, despite the fact that it is actually a more mundane and ubiquitous cultural occurrence. Readings of *Titus* that take part in the popular approach are thus unwittingly linked to a long tradition of misreading interracialism.

### **Ahistorical Interracialism**

A tradition of misinterpretation — one that both the play and the dominant approach engenders — impacts an ability to properly historicize interracialism in early modern England. Most immediately, seeing racial mixing thematically divorces it from its relation to lived experiences. It grounds the topic too deeply in fiction rather than rooting it in culture. For example, seeing Aaron and Tamora's child as a sign of pollution, a metaphor for the body politic gone awry, instead of seeing it first as a child, fractures interracialism's connection to the quotidian. Thus, it necessarily becomes something of the notable, the consequential, and even the notional. Post-racial approaches to the topic of interracialism are subtended by a similar proclivity to overestimate its cultural significance. Here, I juxtapose the optimistic and pessimistic approaches to show that each uses the topic to stake out challenges to the status quo. Further, I demonstrate that just as Lavinia's claims about "experiments" necessarily overlook

*Titus*'s broader interracialism, both contemporary and early modern approaches — in their proclivity to exaggerate — disregard a comprehensive view of the topic, eliding and erasing histories of quotidian racial intermixture.

The post-racial perspective leans on interracialism's supposed culturally consequential nature. Ruth La Ferla's 2003 *New York Times* article "Generation E.A.: Ethnically Ambiguous," in many ways, encapsulates this popular take. A launch-point for Michelle Elam's insightful monograph on the aesthetic and political dimensions of new millennial mixedness, the article proclaims that ethnic and racial "ambiguity is chic, especially among the under-25 members of Generation Y, *the most racially diverse population in the nation's history*" (La Ferla, emphasis mine). La Ferla's piece cites an increasingly visible group of mixed race models and actors, correlates their popularity with a demographic increase in diversity, and, with the confirmation of a handful of notable fashion and advertising professionals, posits that ethnic ambiguity is in vogue.

The rationale behind La Ferla's article seems sensible enough: an increase in racial mixing in the late-20<sup>th</sup> and early-21<sup>st</sup> centuries produced "Generation E.A.," and spurred by this momentous demographic shift, popular culture — particularly in modeling and entertainment — drifted away from the "blond-haired, blue-eyed models" (La Ferla) of the previous generation. In a nutshell, racial mixing caused a palpable cultural shift. Such an example immediately appears to contravene the ideology motivating Lavinia and Bassianus's xenophobic rhetoric. La Ferla's piece, which delineates the "power of ethnic ambiguity" in commodity culture, correlates the cultural shift with the "currently fashionable argument that race itself is a fiction." In so much as the proliferation and prominence of interracialism is reflective of the adoption of a new racial

politics, albeit a “currently fashionable” one, the piece identifies what might best be referred to as progress in interethnic relations.

Even though La Ferla celebrates mixedness, the interpretive mode of her analysis is similar to the one employed in *Titus*. The mixed body as *new* phenomenon challenges the status quo in both cases. Where the post-racial perspective posits this challenge as positive, Lavinia and Bassianus assert that it is negative. According to the two Romans, Aaron and Tamora flout the social taboo of racial mixing and “try experiments” (2.3.69). For La Ferla, the “increasingly multiracial American population” subverts the bastion of intransigent racial categorization and, with it, familiar mores of racism. In both cases, the mixed body offers an intervention — destructive or constructive — to long-standing cultural norms.

Edward Herbert’s *Occasional Verses*, which was posthumously published in 1665, similarly demonstrates that, even in the early modern period, the mythos of interracialism need not posit a negative consequence to partake in this procedure.<sup>24</sup> His “The Brown Beauty” is an otherwise curious piece in its anticipation of the post-racial praise of the racially mixed body, but when contextualized within the broader proclivity to see something momentous in interracialism, it is far less unusual.

Herbert’s opening stanza immediately takes part in what Joel Fineman refers to in *Shakespeare’s Perjur’d Eye* as “paradoxical praise” (34). In that vein, it begins with a focus that “establishes, stipulates, even exaggerates the black and white, positive and negative polarities” (Fineman 34). Although the brown beauty, whom the speaker names Phaie, becomes a focal point to resolve these dichotomies:

While the two contraries of Black and White,

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<sup>24</sup> Sollors identifies this poem as one about racial mixing. See Sollors, *Anthology of Interracial Literature*.

In the Brown *Phaie* are so well unite,  
That they no longer now seem opposite,  
Who doubts but love, hath this his color chose,  
Since he therein doth both th' extremes compose,  
And as within their proper Centre close? (1-6)

Here Herbert engages the traditional early modern polarity of black and white, a binary that is made central to Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* Sonnet 7 when that poem's speaker notes that "black seems beauties contrary" (10). But instead of resolving this tension by arguing, as Sidney's speaker does, that Stella is so beautiful that "she even in black doth make all beauties flow" (11), Herbert privileges neither extreme.

Prior to the intervention of scholars like Kim Hall, poetic engagement with issues of light and dark was often considered non-racial.<sup>25</sup> Her analysis of sequences like Sidney's *Astrophel* demonstrates that the "'dark lady' conceit organized certain cultural values regarding the proper 'use' of foreign *materia*" (71). For Hall, the involvement of the early modern English upper-class in colonial affairs was represented in their verse. Keen to remind us that Sidney himself held strong ties to colonial activity, she cogently demonstrates that such entanglements offered potential for both enrichment and destruction.<sup>26</sup> This economic and gendered tension comes to the fore in verse that praises dark beauty by deeming it fair. Such a process attempts to incorporate the riches of the foreign while preserving the primacy of English culture. For Hall,

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<sup>25</sup> My use of Fineman here, as well as my analysis of the racialized element to paradoxical praise, is indebted to Hall's work in *Things of Darkness*.

<sup>26</sup> Of Sidney's colonial connections, Hall writes: "Sidney...and his circle all had investments in colonial trade. He and his sister, the noted literary patron Mary Herbert, invested in the Frobisher and Fenton voyages, and Sidney further invested in Gilbert's enterprises as well as in various privateering ventures. His father-in-law, Francis Walsingham; his friend, Fulke Greville; and his queen, Elizabeth, were all members of the Virginia Companies" (73).



this type of lyric “is concerned with effacing the colonial economic practices of the English gentry” through “a poetics of color in which whiteness is established as a valued goal” (66).

Yet if Sidney furthers this normative procedure of early modern English verse, particularly by employing it to “organize certain cultural values regarding the proper use of foreign *materia*,” Herbert’s poem uses the topic of interracialism to *reorganize* such values. His verse continues:

Therefore as it presents not to the view  
That whitely raw and unconcocted hiew,  
Which Beauty Northern Nations think the true;  
So neither hath it that adust aspect,  
The *Moor* and *Indian* so much affect,  
That for it they all other do reject. (7-12)

Here, there is not only the predictable rejection of the “adust” or dark phenotype of Moors and Indians, but more surprisingly, a rebuff of the “whitely raw and unconcocted” skin of Northernness. Unlike Sidney’s verse, Herbert’s lyric flouts whiteness as a valued goal and instead praises the union of black and white.

In conjunction with its reorganization of value systems of white and black, Herbert’s verse concludes upon a praise of Phaie that reads astoundingly post-racial. His speaker refers to her as the “honour” of her sex, and foresees a future:

when the World shall with contention strive  
To whom they would a chief perfection give,  
They might the controversie so decide,  
As quitting all extreams on either side,

You more than any may be dignify'd. (20-24)

Elaborated upon here is the notion of a perfect racial union in view of a world that is preoccupied with “extreams.” Herbert’s work sees this union in the hypothetical Phaie. She is “in so *rare* proportion” (16, emphasis mine) equally mixed, and because of this unique combination, her existence is deeply consequential; she is Aaron and Tamora’s experiment perfected, offering resolution instead of pollution.

Of course, if one mixed body represents the decay of a culture while the other offers an end to a racial binarism (Phaie, of course, stands to induce white people and black people to stop thinking of their respective phenotypes as superior), it is more likely the case that both claims are off the mark. The tendency to see something drastically consequential in racial mixing — with either a negative or a positive result — repeatedly elides a more comprehensive view of the issue. Indeed, Herbert’s praising verse does not at all account for the “loathsome” (4.2.67) birth of Aaron and Tamora’s child, nor does it even accept the possibility for *The Tempest*’s at least half-African, “freckled whelp” (1.2.285) Caliban to be rendered so monstrously.<sup>27</sup> More importantly, neither the negative nor positive approaches account for more quotidian mixing. On the contrary, each view belies a far less exciting conclusion: racial mixing has very little impact on the dominant racial organization of a culture.

Regardless of their untenability, we are inured to these more extreme interpretations of interracialism. If we look again at *Titus*, we can see Shakespeare’s continued participation in just such renderings. When Aaron suggests replacing Tamora’s dark-skinned baby for a light-skinned

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<sup>27</sup> Critical history has long associated Caliban with racial hybridity. Loomba notes Caribbean intellectuals that “grappled with the politics of race in the Americas, interpreting Caliban variously as a symbol of black power and as a hybrid typifying the ‘mestizaje’ or racial intermixture of the region” (163). Shakespeare does indeed imagine Caliban with African heritage. According to Ariel, Caliban’s mother Sycorax is born in “Algiers” (1.2.263).

one, such that the latter “shall be advanced, / and be received for the Emperor’s heir” (4.2.156-157), Shakespeare again raises a drastic cultural consequence. In Aaron’s scheme, Saturninus “dandle[s]...for his own” (4.2.160) a child of mixed heritage, enabling that child to eventually reach Rome’s highest station. In relation to this plan, Royster asks and answers a question of incredible significance: “if mothers can be bought off so easily, why didn’t Aaron just buy a white baby? His insistence on obtaining a baby who looks white but is ‘really’ Moorish suggests allegiance to his race, a commitment to establishing a foothold of power for Moors within the very heart of Rome” (453).

For as much as this threat is raised — and for as much as “Tudor England lived in fear of imposters” (Royster 453) and thus would have recognized the gravity of Aaron’s scheme — it is never perpetrated.<sup>28</sup> Curiously, the deeply threatening topic of a mixed race baby that can pass as white is dropped entirely. We are reminded here of Shakespeare’s inability to follow-through on Lavinia and Bassianus’s more extreme but otherwise convincing assertions that the interracial relationship between Tamora and Aaron is a paramount issue. This offers a supplementary answer to Royster’s inquiry: here, the mixed body is used to raise an extreme cultural consequence — specifically the establishment of a “foothold of power for Moors” in Rome. This is why Shakespeare does not simply have Aaron find a white baby: a mixed child enables him to raise the attendant drastic consequences. But again, the consequences that are proposed by the mixing are out of step with the larger direction of the play. Even if Aaron’s plot succeeded, Saturninus’s line — and with it, his secretly Moorish “heir” — would have been deposed in the coup upon which the play concludes.

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<sup>28</sup> Royster notes the “stripping of witches to search for devil’s tokens” and a concern about “lower-class swindlers who dressed well and put on posh accents to infiltrate the aristocracy” (453).

To wit, we have seen in La Ferla's post-racial argument the suggestion that the mixed body has displaced the cultural primacy of the blonde-haired, blue-eyed aesthetic and, with it, the groundings of racial division altogether; we have seen Lavinia and Bassianus — along with contemporary critics — argue that racial mixing is an act that represents pollution on the macro-level of the cultural and the political; we have seen Aaron float a vividly drastic scheme in which Rome's line of succession is infiltrated by Moors through a mixed race child; and we have seen Edward Herbert claim that Phaie's mixed beauty offers "chief perfection" that can settle something of a global aesthetic "controversie" (22).

It goes without saying that not all racial mixing poses an infiltrative threat to white governments.<sup>29</sup> Nor does it displace beauty standards or categorically pollute cultures. Relatedly, racial mixing cannot dismantle — for better or for worse — traditional racial divisions. That said, the post-racial approach to the topic rests upon a notion that racial mixing carries the capacity to reshape otherwise intransigent American racial ideology, and such an over-reading and misinterpretation — especially when divorced from this type of scrutiny — holds broad appeal in the popular consciousness.

Very much in concert with the tenor of La Ferla's article, the contemporary Multicultural Movement eventually came to a head under just such a belief. According to Heather Dalmage, groups like I-Pride (Interracial/Intercultural Pride) and the BFN (Biracial Family Network) began in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a resource to mixed families. But by the late 1980s, these groups had more or less collected under umbrella organizations like the AMEA (Association of MultiEthnic Americans), who sought to add a multiethnic category to the

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<sup>29</sup> The conspiracy theory that former American President Barack Obama is secretly a Muslim with sympathies for terrorism come to mind.

Census.<sup>30</sup> Dalmage writes that “what had began as a group of mothers meeting to discuss the narrowness of racial categories, community, kinship, and racism was now becoming an organization with a political agenda that would challenge the discussion of race in the United States” (3).

This approach to racial mixing — which capitalized on its ostensible potential to “challenge the discussion of race” — held diverse political appeal. Where Lavinia and Bassianus see a mythos of mixing bringing on cultural cataclysm and Herbert’s verse follows that mythos to assert a grand aesthetic ideal, the Multicultural Movement also saw its investment in the cultural potentials of racial mixing through to notably divergent conclusions. It appealed, ostensibly, to liberal-leaning members who aspired to undermine binary American racial division.<sup>31</sup> Those members placed great stock in the ability for interracialism to produce real progress. However, the movement also attracted staunchly conservative members, particularly those that felt that an increase in racial mixing meant that legal protections for racial minorities were no longer necessary. As Kerry Ann Rockquemore explains, “those seeking to explode the myth of race made convenient, if not odd, bedfellows with those seeking to dismantle civil rights gains by eliminating the government’s capability to monitor compliance with that legislation” (135). As Rockquemore notes, one of the most notable supporters of the movement was Newt Gingrich (135).

In conjunction with appealing to rather polar constituencies, this investment in the power of racial mixing also spoke to mainstream culture. Rockquemore continues: “this coalition tapped into a somewhat unspoken sentiment within the general white mainstream audience who,

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<sup>30</sup> For a more expansive account of the topic, see Dalmage’s collection, *The Politics of Multiracialism*. See also DaCosta, *Making Multiracials*.

<sup>31</sup> Indeed, as Dalmage writes, the movement had its roots in the civil rights movement (2).

by and large, believe that racism is a thing of the past, that racial inequalities no longer exist, and that the government perpetuates the race problem by continued collection of racial data” (135-136). Thus, despite the more earnest efforts of those in the Multicultural movement to “explode the myth of race,” policies that utilized the mythos of interracialism correlated almost seamlessly with conservative agendas and also the ideological leanings of a white, mainstream, post-racial perspective.<sup>32</sup>

The meeting of these two conflicting concerns under a common rubric reveals a great deal about the place of interracialism in the popular consciousness. The consequentiality of racial mixing holds broad appeal. It bridges the gap between Herbert’s fetishizing verse and Lavinia and Bassianus’s stock xenophobia. And in the contemporary moment, it appeals to the liberal, conservative, and moderate outlook. To see a power in racial mixing — as a unifier or divider of culture, for example, or as the key to ideal beauty or path toward the monstrous — necessitates a common fixation. It requires that we make something of the interracialism in front of us without regarding the broader picture of racial mixing. In short, it encourages us to both disregard the realities of our own time and also the realities of the past.

If we broaden our gaze to take in that larger picture of interracialism, these grand extrapolations are no longer quite so convincing. In *Titus*, we need only look toward the play’s introduction of a second mixed race infant to find Lavinia and Bassianus’s castigations undermined. Similarly, in the post-racial moment, we need only look at the history of American racial mixing to see the myopia behind many of the claims that are mobilized by the Multicultural Movement. Michelle Elam articulates the drawbacks of our more myopic approaches to interracialism when she writes that “the popular emphasis on the mixed person as

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<sup>32</sup> I provide a deeper examination of post-racialism in this project’s first chapter. For an extensive view on the topic, see Bonilla-Silva.

nouveau, as sui generis in history, usually necessitates the strategic erasure of a past that might suggest otherwise” (15). In the case of the Multicultural Movement, the over-investment in the power of increasing racial intermixture to solve racism tends to elide the prevalence of racial intermixture within periods of more overt racism. As Elam notes, “according to some studies, well over 80 percent of people of African descent in North America are mixed, and Latinos also, of course, comprise mestizo and diasporic mixes. There is no purity to overturn” (14). Elam’s figures are corroborated by the research of F. James Davis, who asserts that “at least three-fourths of all people defined as American blacks have some white ancestry, and some estimates run well above 90 percent” (21). As I will discuss later, a good deal of the intermixture between white and black originated on the American plantation through coercive sexual relationships between slave master and slave, and the absence of these origins from post-racial arguments about interracialism speaks not just to a drastic historical amnesia but also to the manner in which the topic of interracialism is so often coopted to perpetuate white cultural domination. In short, mixedness is less a millennial phenomenon than an inextricable fact of American history and its resulting demographics.

Such estimations offer a challenge to the popular notion of the novelty of mixedness, and it simultaneously calls into question the ability of interracialism to effect anything other than superficial cultural change. If, as post-racial arguments suggest, racial mixing is key to solving racism, then the widespread racial mixing that occurred in pre-civil rights and antebellum America would have drastically mitigated the anti-blackness that is commonly associated with those historical moments. This assertion is simplistic, but it serves to question the inherent sociocultural power of racial intermixture. That is, it seeks to emphasize that racial mixing, in

and of itself, has historically failed to subvert dominant and pervasive racialized ideologies, despite convincing arguments to the contrary.

It might, of course, be argued that regardless of how pervasive racial mixing is and was, the key to utilizing contemporary interracialism to effect social progress lies in the ability to identify those populations. For example, the Multicultural Movement succeeded in altering the format of the 2000 U.S. Census to allow participants to “mark one or more” ethnicity.<sup>33</sup>

However, one need only look deeper into American history to trouble this conclusion. Indeed, the mulatto category made an appearance on the 1850 American Census (DaCosta 24). In the same vein, the American South once identified people of mixed descent through a regimented system that delineated racial ancestry in terms of fractions: labels like quadroon and octoroon were at one time common American terminology.<sup>34</sup>

Because post-racial predilections and early modern approaches offer inroads to interracialism that follow an ahistorical paradigm, and because early modern English histories concerning its black population are drastically deficient, the early modern field is at particular risk of overlooking histories of interracialism that contravene the popular approach to the topic.<sup>35</sup> We look to a period that has a penchant for seeing interracialism as consequential yet offers an archive that shows almost no consequence. And we look to this period from a moment that has inculcated the notion that interracialism is inherently impactful.

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<sup>33</sup> See Dalmage.

<sup>34</sup> In a March 4, 1815 letter to Francis Gray, Thomas Jefferson relates, in rather inhumane calculus, equations for racial mixing. For example, he writes: “let the first crossing be of  $a$ , pure negro, with  $A$ , pure white. The unit of blood of the issue being composed of the half of that of each parent, will be  $a/2 + A/2$ . Call it, for abbreviation,  $h$  (half blood).” Although it anticipates the next section, it is worth pointing out that Jefferson sired mixed children with Sally Hemings. More importantly, though, as outline by Annette Gordon Reed in *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family*, rumors of the very real affair had little impact on Jefferson’s political career.

<sup>35</sup> For an investigation of the early modern English archive that focuses on black people, see Habib.



As I explicate in the next section, to see a comprehensive history of racial mixing, we must first reckon with manifestations of interracialism that undermine the popular myths attached to the topic. The long tradition of seeing racial mixing in such myopic ways is complicit with the elision of those manifestations of interracialism that emphasize, in particular, a legacy of white oppression. That is, what is often left out of popular conversations on racial mixing — and indeed what contravenes the popular approach — is the history of sexual violence committed against enslaved women. In this way, we might see the popular approach as not just inextricable from the mainstream social and political view but also from mechanisms of a dominant, white culture. American examples offer a particularly viable inroad to further examine early modern England's more comprehensive relationship to interracialism.

### **The “Supposed” Fathers of Racial Mixing**

Further demonstrating how popular approaches to racial mixing obscure a comprehensive view of the topic, this section explicates in more detail how limited views of interracialism often serve the desires of dominant culture. The dominant form of interpretation emphasizes particular types of racial mixing in favor of others. For example, in the post-racial moment, only progressive minded or chic iterations of mixing suit the narrative of racial transcendence. Yet, racial mixing also occurred on the American slave plantation as a result of regimes of racial oppression, a fact that is not nearly as prevalent in the dominant purview.

As I show below, condemnatory views to the topic foster the same blindspot. Counterintuitively, historical approaches that demean racial mixing also tend to overlook one of its most abhorrent iterations. As with the post-racial approach, this elision is cultivated by focusing on specific manifestations of interracialism, particularly those that occur between black

males and white females. This focus obscures a deeply troubling history of sexual violence committed against enslaved women, an issue that is also germane to early modern English history.

Where in the post-racial example, beliefs about progressive racial intermixture are employed to serve the political interests of mainstream and conservative white cultures, the hyper-focus on the gendered paradigm offered by Tamora and Aaron works in both the early modern and American historical context to uphold the interests of a dominant, white male culture. The notion that relationships like Aaron and Tamora's — specifically, relationships between a black man and a white woman — are especially transgressive diverts attention from the more problematic and sometimes abhorrent iterations of intermixture, especially those perpetrated by slave owners.

Take the most well-known account of interracialism from the period: George Best's now famous musings on a mixed family. In 1578, he writes of having “seen an Ethiopian as black as a coal brought into England, who taking a fair English woman to wife, begat a son in all respects as black as the father was, although England were his native country, and an English woman his mother” (108). Best surmises that “this blackness proceedeth rather of some natural infection of that man, which was so strong, that neither the nature of the clime, neither the good complexion of the mother concurring, could any thing alter” (108). Perhaps best known for refuting prevailing theories that tied ethnic difference to climate and geographic location, Best's musings propose that the blackness of Africans derives from the curse of Ham, which manifest in Ham's son Chus, and that from “the black and cursed Chus came all these black Moores which are in Africa” (109). In conjunction with delineating a shifting understanding of race and ethnicity — one that proposes, through its evocation of the Noah story, a major justifier for African

enslavement — Best’s conclusions, while challenging the geohumoral paradigm, nonetheless rely heavily upon relatively stock early modern notions about interracialism.<sup>36</sup>

In a fashion not unlike the modern-day practice of over-reading interracialism’s cultural impact, Best’s assessment of the child is quickly mapped onto “the whole progeny” of Africans (109). Moreover, Best suggests that his encounter is a relatively singular event. He offers a “more fresh example” of Inuit captives, which signals to his readers that an interracial family is something of an aberration, unlikely to be encountered again. Of course, there is nothing that would suggest Best believes otherwise, or that interracial couplings are even remotely common in his purview. But by foregrounding this particular family in this such a way, Best does little to elucidate the multifarious nature of early modern interracialism. Instead, he reproduces a gendered paradigm that is in concert with dominant English concerns about racial mixing. As Kim Hall writes concerning this passage, it “is less important for its evidence that there was racial intermarriage in England than for its articulation of the cultural anxieties — about complexion, miscegenation, control of women, and, above all, ‘Englishness’ — brought out by the presence of blacks” (11).

If we take this moment as more than just another interpretive misfire facilitated by the topic of racial mixing, we can see that the concerns of white culture are reflected in dominant conceptions of interracialism. Worries about cultural infiltration are expressed through the “black man-white woman narrative” that Boose identifies as the “epitome of the romantically transgressive story” (42).<sup>37</sup> Best’s account also posits this particular gendered paradigm as immoral. His narrative is immediately injected with moralisms once it is brought into

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<sup>36</sup> See Floyd-Wilson, for a gloss of Best’s relevance to a shifting ideology of race in the period.

<sup>37</sup> It is worth noting here that the prevalence of this paradigm speaks to the curious absence of black women from the early modern stage. Boose, Daileader, and Hall’s “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner” explore this absence.

conversation with Old Testament mythos. Sujata Iyengar notes, for example, that the account “implicitly associat[es] the Ethiopian father in England and his ‘faire’ wife with the sexual disobedience of Cham and his spouse in the Ark” (9). In this way, the couple’s relationship is made religiously transgressive, appearing contrary to the Christian mores of English culture.

Such an implication undermines the legitimacy of the pairing. In linking racial blackness with infection, Best’s passage corresponds with the castigations levied against Tamora by Bassianus when he notes the Empress’s “spotted” honor (2.3.74). As in *Titus*, concerns of cultural infiltration and intermixture are located in a specifically gendered iteration of interracialism. But, as is also the case with Shakespeare’s tragedy, Best’s assessment obscures a comprehensive view of the topic. We are made here to see transgression through relationships like Aaron and Tamora’s, but we are not prompted to imagine the problematics of the union between a white man and a black woman.

The cultural elisions perpetuated by Best’s passage extend to most major engagements with the topic. Historically speaking, sustained focus on interracialism almost always pushes concerns about liaisons between black males and white females to the fore, while downplaying or eliminating entirely the problematics raised by white male-black female pairings. The etymology of the term “miscegenation” brings this procedure into relief. In her thorough monograph on the topic, Elise Lemire explains the word’s roots:

Enough people believed “amalgamation” was a violation of natural law that political operators could hope to tap that conviction on a wide scale. And so it was that in the final days of 1863, two New York Democrats intent on foiling Abraham Lincoln’s bid for reelection wrote and published anonymously in New York City a seventy-two page pamphlet entitled *Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of*

*the Races, Applied to the American White Man and Negro*, in which they posed as Republicans who advocated inter-racial marriage between “the white man” and “Negro,” or what the authors named “miscegenation,” as “indispensable to a progressive humanity.” The aim of David Goodman Croly, an editor of the New York *World*, one of the most influential Democratic journals in the country and the principal organ of the Democrats in New York, and George Wakeman, a reporter there, was to attribute to all Republicans the supposed views of the abolitionists, of whom it was so often claimed...that they wholeheartedly supported inter-marriage. (116)

The fear-mongering tactic of the pamphlet’s creators was rooted in an anxiety within mid-19<sup>th</sup> century white America that emancipation would lead to widespread racial intermixture. That even many abolitionists at the time found the notion of racial mixing distasteful or unnatural demonstrates the extent to which the pamphlet writers stood to capitalize politically upon a faux celebration of its virtues, reinforcing not just the fears of dedicated Democrats, but also swaying the minds of more moderate Republicans.<sup>38</sup>

The issue of interracialism is here marshaled to serve the interests of a dominant, white culture — specifically to forestall abolition. But it is an otherwise curious document in that it is written to appear to be an abolitionist text. In this vein, its faux celebration of racial mixing necessitates that it glosses the more troubling sexual relationships between slavemaster and slave. That said, its approach to the issue exemplifies just how strategically abhorrence of these coercive relationships could be downplayed. Indeed, its compass of the topic borrows its tone from the pamphlet’s sustained and feigned celebration, which actually legitimates sexual

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<sup>38</sup> See Lemire.

violence against enslaved women by concluding that interracial relations between slavemasters and their slaves “helped strengthen the vitality and add to the mental force of the Southerner” (369). It begins by referring to the unions as “illicit” and “sanctioned neither by law nor conscience,” but it fails entirely to implicate slaveholders as perpetrators of aggressive action. On the contrary, the pamphlet argues that “the local history of New Orleans, since its occupation by the Union army, *proves* what has often been suspected, that unions between the slaveholders and their slaves have often had, in the eye of the parties themselves, *all the sanctities of marriage*” (369, emphasis mine).

After making palatable the otherwise “illicit” union between white males and black females by legitimating it for its “sanctities,” the pamphlet turns its attention to the issue of black male-white female relationships. It is keen to remind us — while touting the great benefits of racial intermixture — that “Southern women” are not “indifferent to the strange magnetism of association with a tropical race” (370). This claim enables the pamphlet to dangle the proposition that white women will pursue relationships with black men once slavery is abolished. But it represents the current state of Southern women as yet untainted, asserting that the affections between them and male slaves comprises mainly “a platonic love, a union of sympathies, emotions, and thoughts” (370).

White women’s sanctity becomes the site upon which the pamphlet capitalizes on fears of pollution. It celebrates the day when “men and women the world over are free to form unions with their opposites in color and race” as the day when “the full mystery of sex” will be embraced. This “mystery” is bound up in the image of the “impressible daughters of the South” (370). Readers are meant to see white women’s vulnerability here, one that is protected only by

the institution of slavery. The image crafted by the pamphlet is one that is meant to rouse the white reader to fear:

Nor, in view of the powerful attraction of the two races, is this frenzy of love in the white Southern woman for the negro, altogether inexplicable. The family is isolated on the plantations. The white young man is away at college, traveling in Europe, or practicing at his profession in the large cities, while the white girl, who matures early, is at her home, surrounded by the brightest and most intelligent of the young colored men on the estate. Passionate, full of sensibility, without the cold prudence of her Northern sister, who can wonder at the wild dreams of love which fire the hearts and fill the imagination of the impressible Southern maiden.

(371)

Given the racist context of the pamphlet, this is clearly an image of potential violation. It is the impressionable daughter, given to “wild dreams of love,” who is liable to fall for “the strange magnetism” of black men in the absence of “the young white man.”

The pamphlet does not limit black men to mystical powers of attraction alone. Its faux celebration of black males is marked by subtle, racist clues to their aggressive nature. The pamphlet explains that the black man “is mild, spiritual, fond of melody and song, warm in his attachments, fervid in his passions but inoffensive and kind, and only apparently brutal when his warmest emotions are brought into play in his love for the white woman” (364). The last clause makes vivid the type of danger that black men pose to naive white women. In contradistinction to the slaveholders that bring to their interracial relationships “all the sanctities of marriage,” relationships between black men and white women are marked by the aggressiveness of black men and the impressionable and defenseless nature of white women.

As such, the term “miscegenation” carries with it an entirely uneven and notably pejorative interest in relationships between black males and white females. And indeed, the anti-miscegenation legislation that would follow emancipation only recapitulated this particularly uneven form of concern. Kim M. Williams describes this hypocritical stance, writing that “the fact that white men contributed considerably to the abundance of mulattos in the first place did not deter white supremacists from exploiting fears of interracial sex via the inveterate trope of white women's virtue, on the one hand, and black men's bestiality, on the other” (23). The fervor with which such legislation was both created and enforced insulated a substantial sampling of white males from implication as the perpetrators of coercive interracial sex.

Because this historical camouflage holds its roots in the censure of black male-white female pairings, it is not a stretch to contextualize Best’s account as part of this legacy. His anecdote serves as a chief piece of evidence of early modern English concerns with interracialism and the origins of racial difference, and then is frequently cited in studies of the topic.<sup>39</sup> Because it is so well-known, and because it recapitulates the transgressive black man-white woman paradigm, it does little on its own to enable us to think about the ways in which white males both engaged in interracial sex and also perpetuated narratives that downplayed or elided their participation.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the complicity of Best’s anecdote with the stock paradigm of transgressive interracialism attaches it to a history of misleading assumptions about racial mixing. If anything, Best’s anecdote is evidence of the type of interracialism that was more frequently disseminated in early modern English discursive culture: black male-white female

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<sup>39</sup> Best’s passage is examined in the work of Boose, Floyd-Wilson, Habib, Hall, Iyengar, Little, and numerous other scholars of early modern race. Best’s passage also appears a number of times in this dissertation.

<sup>40</sup> In her gloss of this anecdote, Boose notes that “European travelers no doubt fathered children in Africa over the years” (44). Boose’s project is attuned to the relative absence of black women in early modern discursive culture.



relationships. Thus, like the American example, Best's anecdote can obfuscate as much as it reveals early modern histories.

Contemporaneous with George Best's writings, a group of baptisms occur in St. Andrew's Parish in the port town of Plymouth, England that offer a different view of racial mixing.<sup>41</sup> For example, in 1593, "Helene," the daughter of "Christian *the negro s[er]vant* to Richerd Sheere *the supposed father bing* Cuthbert Holman" was baptized in St. Andrew's Parish (Cruwys 47). The uncertainty concerning the patrilineage of this child is immediately striking. It draws our attention to an impulse counter to that of Best's: where Best publishes the account of a black man's relationship with a white woman and employs it to propose a vast cultural hypothesis, a mixed race child born to an enslaved black woman and sired by a white man is attended by a curious disinterest. Helene's birth is not the occasion for proto-scientific inquiry, nor is it one for even basic investigation. Instead, her birth to Christian the "*negro s[er]vant*" hardly registers in the grand scheme of English engagement with its cultural others.

But here we are dealing with the quotidian, and in particular, we are dealing with that realm of quotidian racism that was clearly meant to be downplayed. As Imtiaz Habib writes concerning records like Christian's, "the insistence of a paternal attribution of the birth, together with the concomitant qualification of the named attribution as the 'supposed' points to the simultaneous civic attempt and failure to 'normalize' what is patently the exposed consequence of the illicit sexual exploitation of a [sic] black women held in chattel bondage" (200). While we might apply a healthy skepticism to this baptismal record — one that could propose that Christian engaged in a consensual relationship with Holman, and that Holman simply was not present at the baptism to corroborate this — the repetition of this obfuscatory procedure in other

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<sup>41</sup> Plymouth was home to the Elizabethan slave trader John Hawkins, whom I cover in this project's first chapter. His voyages brought African people into Plymouth decades before *Titus* is written.

records shows a troubling pattern. In Peter Fryer's now 30-year-old monograph on the subject of the black population in England, he finds, in the same parish record in which Helene and Christian appear, that "the illegitimate daughter of Mary, described as '*a negro of John Whites,*' was baptized in Plymouth in 1594; the supposed father was a Dutchman" (9). Where this child is indicated in the record to be the "supposed d[daughter] of John Kinge" (Cruwys 57), the trend of uncertain patrilineage only intensifies in other instances from this record. As Michael Guasco writes concerning two similar 1596 baptisms from the same record, "Devonshire officials recorded their suspicion that the illegitimate offspring were fathered by Portuguese men" (104).

Identifying only "supposed" fathers and non-Englishmen as the perpetrators of interracial sex protects the interests of England's dominant culture, contributing to the silences that surround such iterations of racial mixing from the period. And it is anything but unique in England's discursive approach to colonial activity and ethnic others. Take William Biddulph's rather sanctimonious account of his travels from Aleppo to Jerusalem in 1600:

In Constantinople, Aleppo, and other places of Turkey, where there is trafficking, and trading of merchants, it is no rare matter for popish Christians of sundry countries, to *cut cabine* (as they call it) that is, to take any woman of that country where they sojourn...to use them as wives so long as they sojourn in that country, and maintain them gallantly, to the consuming of their wealth, diminishing of their health, and endangering of their own souls. And when they depart out of that country, they shake off their sweethearts, and leave them to shift for themselves and their children. And this they account no sin. (172)

Biddulph's identification of "popish" Christians casts a blanket indictment on the travelers from continental Europe, but it absolves the Protestant English. Interracial sex between white men and

women of differing ethnicities is censured here, but even in this account, racial mixing is marshaled to valorize Biddulph's own English culture. In Biddulph's account, the English are exonerated to an even greater extent than the American slaveholders are in the case of Wakeman and Croly's pamphlet. There, the American slaveholders are rendered in sanctified relationships with their slaves. For Biddulph, the Protestant English simply do not bother with the interracial enterprise at all.

Of course, we should take Biddulph's account with skepticism, considering that a number of enslaved black women in Elizabethan English households give birth to illegitimate children. According to the Elizabethan records of St. Andrews Parish, the English are as lustful as their continental neighbors, and the black women they enslave are regularly confronted with sexual situations in which there is a threatening imbalance of power.

The instances in which subjugated black women give birth to mixed race children of uncertain patrilineage is connected to the sexual violence committed on the American slave plantation. In both cases, white men engage in coercive relationships with the black women they own. And even while children are produced from these relationships, cultural mechanisms shield the white men from blame. Frederick Douglass's account of his parentage in his 1845 autobiography, *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, bares this procedure out:

The whisper that my master was my father, may or may not be true; and, true or false, it is of but little consequence to my purpose whilst the fact remains, in all its glaring odiousness, that slaveholders have ordained, and by law established, that the children of slave women shall in all cases follow the condition of their

mothers; and this is done too obviously to administer to their own lusts, and make a gratification of their wicked desires profitable as well as pleasurable. (17)

Douglass's identification of only a "whisper" emphasizes the relative silence that accompanies this particular type of interracial contact. Despite the "odiousness" of such actions, their discursive afterlife is strikingly small.

Where the "lusts" of the American slave master are aided by legislation, no such legislation existed in Elizabethan England. We are reminded here of Habib's assessment that the language used in these records indicates a "civic attempt and failure to 'normalize' what is patently the exposed consequence of the illicit sexual exploitation of a [sic] black women held in chattel bondage" (200). Thus, the record indicates some recourse to legitimate what is otherwise abhorrent: it follows some procedure to mitigate the culpability of the involved white men, and this procedure — while not the crafty legislation of the antebellum American South — is deployed on a relatively routine basis.

Under this cover, white men in early modern England were able to take sexual advantage of black women, and they were able to do so in a way that garnered nothing of the fascination, interest, and attention with which Best approaches the black man-white woman relationship. These procedures of repudiation and silencing are bolstered by the period's fascination with the black man-white woman paradigm, which flourishes in the drama and literature of the period and garners an overwhelming amount of attention relative to any paradigm that might implicate white men, especially Englishmen. There is a complicity between the myopic overemphasis of particular manifestations of interracialism and the erasure of comprehensive histories.<sup>42</sup> The popular take on interracialism leads us away from these silences. It fosters the belief that

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<sup>42</sup> Elam's words are again pertinent here. She reminds us of the "strategic erasure" (15) that accompanies the popular approach to racial mixing.

interracialism is inherently consequential, and thus we are inured to the view that if it occurs it will necessarily also register out of all proportion to its real cultural impact. Inasmuch as anecdotes like Best's are complicit with the routines of the dominant culture, they only lead us further astray.

### **“Behold the Child”: Mixing as Misdirection**

As I have demonstrated, when racial mixing is presented in sensational ways, a comprehensive view of the topic is obscured. Post-racialism proffers a newness to racial mixture, one that elides America's deep and troubled history of interracialism on venues like the slave plantation. Anti-interracial approaches in both the American and early modern context aggravate anxieties concerning black male-white female relationships while they overlook relationships — especially coercive ones — in which white men are the aggressors.

These popular approaches to the topic often serve the needs of a dominant culture. In the post-racial moment, racial mixing is framed as the cure for longstanding racial tension, but a mainstream and conservative agenda seeking to undermine civil rights era legislation coopted its major political movement. In early modern English and American contexts, the repudiation of interracialism directed attention away from those iterations of racial mixing that implicated white men, insulating the English and American white male reputation via cultural obsessions with the black male-white female paradigm.

Given this context, we might profit from approaching the topic of interracialism in *Titus Andronicus* in a different manner. Rather than focus on the play's negative reactions to racial mixing or see these reactions as evidence that interracialism represents the pollution of the Roman cultural and political landscape, we might instead examine what these reactions obscure.

Moreover, we might begin to question just whose interests are being served through these processes of elision that are enabled by the topic of racial mixing. In light of a more comprehensive take on interracialism, it is overwhelmingly the case that myopic views of the topic do not offer any insight into the cultures in which such nominally transgressive acts take place. Given this, racial mixing does the very opposite of bringing into relief the play's larger emphasis on culture reorganization; it actually obscures a view of the depth of Rome's troubles.

For example, the flurry of violence at the play's conclusion devolves into very little that is defensible even in *Titus*'s world of muddled morals. Tamora and Aaron's pattern of violence is finally met by Titus's vengeance. In a stated homage to Progne's revenge, Titus kills Chiron and Demetrius and bakes them into a pie, only to feed them to Tamora, their unwitting mother. In the tradition of early modern revenge plays, a moment like this is somewhat expected, perhaps even justified by the revenge ethos, given the atrocities that Titus suffers throughout the play. But Lavinia is also caught in the crossfire. With a reference to the myth of "rash Virginius" (5.3.36), and to the shock of Tamora and Saturninus, Titus murders his daughter. This second act of fratricide makes the practice something of a ghastly habit for the General — whose vengeance is ironically motivated by violence done by others to his children.

But before the audience can grapple with the unexpected murder of Lavinia by the play's titular character, Saturninus, the Roman Emperor, is inserted into the slaughter. He reacts to Tamora's murder by killing Titus, and he is, in turn, killed by Lucius. This regicide is undertaken with a notably insufficient justification. Before stabbing the emperor, Lucius appeals: "Can the son's eye behold his father bleed? / There's meed for meed, death for a deadly deed" (5.3.64-65).

Lucius's act is presented to the audience as reactionary, a swiftly fulfilled vendetta. Before the audience can account for the manifold motivations and consequences of Saturninus's

killing — this is, of course, a coup, and one in which Lucius invades Rome with an army of Goths behind him — Marcus Andronicus ascends to speak to the Roman populous. The movement from Lucius's regicide to Marcus's appeal to the populous is separated only by stage direction. In the very next line after Lucius insufficiently justifies killing Rome's emperor, Marcus speaks to the "people and sons of Rome" (5.3.66).

This shift is crucial, because there is no mention of this regicide or the details of Titus's gruesome acts of vengeance in the address that follows. Instead, this appeal to the Roman people glosses over and excuses those more troublesome and culturally consequential happenings.

Marcus begins:

You sad-faced men, people and sons of Rome,  
By uproar sever'd, like a flight of fowl  
Scatter'd by winds and high tempestuous gusts,  
O, let me teach you how to knit again  
This scatter'd corn into one mutual sheaf,  
These broken limbs again into one body. (5.3.66-71)

Marcus speaks of reunification here, but it is essential to point out that this nephew, Lucius, has just murdered the emperor and marched into the city with a foreign army. This grand reunification is more of a cultural collision, one facilitated by the unjust murder of the emperor. Vernon Dickson accurately sums up the nature of this speech, writing that "Marcus speaks to justify his own family, his way of life, and his view of society and civilization, which is often egocentric and colonizing in nature. His kind of unifying speech is a questionable move toward constructing self-focused homogeneity" (403). As evidenced by Marcus's speech, the Andronicii hope to pass this cultural reorganization off as a grand reunion.

Lucius, who speaks next, edges a bit too closely to bringing to light the manufactured nature of this reunification. He begins by delineating the violent acts committed by Chiron and Demetrius, stating that it was “they that murdered our emperor's brother; / And they it were that ravished our sister: / For their fell faults our brothers were beheaded” (5.3.97-99). He continues by lauding his father for his service to the state, but his speech quickly draws a self-sabotaging but accurate parallel between those whom his father fought and the men that he has just brought with him to Rome:

Our father's tears despised, and basely cozen'd  
Of that true hand that fought Rome's quarrel out,  
And sent her enemies unto the grave.  
Lastly, myself unkindly banished,  
The gates shut on me, and turn'd weeping out,  
To beg relief among Rome's enemies:  
Who drown'd their enmity in my true tears.  
And oped their arms to embrace me as a friend.  
I am the turned forth, be it known to you,  
That have preserved her welfare in my blood;  
And from her bosom took the enemy's point,  
Sheathing the steel in my adventurous body. (5.3.100-111)

Lucius's repeated use of “enemies” here damages Marcus's savvy rhetoric of reunification. First, Lucius celebrates Titus for sending enemies “unto the grave.” But then, Lucius asks that we see “Rome's enemies” as trustworthy “friend[s].” To further his cause, he reverts back to depicting Rome's enemies as threats, telling the Roman people that he has protected Rome because “from



her bosom [he] took the enemy's point, / Sheathing the steel in [his] adventurous body." On display here are the Andronicii's equivocations: their self-serving hope to pass off a cultural collision with Rome's enemies as a non-infiltrative event. Lucius, aware of his errors, wraps up this botched speech by stating that he "digress[es] too much" (5.3.115). He asks for "pardon" (5.3.116) before giving the floor back to Marcus.

Marcus's attempt at recovery puts on display the power of the mythos of interracialism. Instead of clarifying Lucius's statements or addressing any of the concerns that it introduces, he immediately raises the issue of interracialism through Aaron and Tamora's child, stating: "Now is my turn to speak. Behold the child" (5.3.118). This display, which foregrounds racial mixing, is employed not just to elide the less-than-honorable acts of the Andronicii, but to gloss over the more impactful cultural shift at hand. The head of state has been murdered, and a Gothic army occupies Rome, but Marcus continues:

Of this was Tamora delivered;  
The issue of an irreligious Moor,  
Chief architect and plotter of these woes:  
The villain is alive in Titus' house,  
And as he is, to witness this is true.  
Now judge what cause had Titus to revenge  
These wrongs, unspeakable, past patience,  
Or more than any living man could bear.  
Now you have heard the truth, what say you, Romans? (5.3.119-127)

Marcus encapsulates "these wrongs, unspeakable, past patience" by emphasizing the sexual relationship between Tamora and Aaron. Aaron, of course, serves the function of "chief

architect” of Rome’s “woes,” but the relevance of Tamora — let alone the mixed race child — to these events is implied but not made explicit. The tacit implication, though, is that this interracialism contributed to chaos that has led to this moment. The suggestion is that the child is genuinely, as Gillies argues, “a living sign of the pollution of the Roman body-politic” (110). Unsurprisingly, the Roman response endorses Marcus’s depiction of racial mixing, and Lucius is expediently declared emperor by the cries of “the common voice” (5.3.139).

In light of the pattern of representing and receiving interracialism, this moment is better approached as one in which Marcus — and indeed Shakespeare — makes much of racial mixing where there actually is very little. As much as his cooptation of the topic offers Marcus and his family something of a cover with which to push a political and cultural agenda of great consequence, it also offers a microcosmic version of the historical elisions that are enabled by the popular approach to racial mixing. Indeed, there is a cultural history of “behold[ing]” those manifestations of interracialism that serve the strategic elision of larger cultural shifts. Marcus’s ruse bets that one case of interracialism between a white woman and a black man can overshadow the fratricides committed by the play’s titular character, the regicide perpetrated by Rome’s newest emperor, and the infusion of a Gothic army into the Roman populous. We are left anesthetized to a more comprehensive and quotidian history of interracialism, preoccupied with those iterations of racial mixing that are emphasized by the dominant culture.

Marcus’s interest in justifying the final actions of the Andronicii align with Shakespeare’s need to reign in what is a noticeably unsatisfying and circular conclusion.<sup>43</sup> Rome is nearly destroyed when a cohort of Goths is “incorporate” — to use Tamora’s phrase — into the city state. To leave Rome at the moment of another infusion of Goths is to leave it almost

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<sup>43</sup> As stated in this chapter’s introduction, *Titus* is traditionally considered one of Shakespeare’s worse plays.

precisely where it started. In working to sell this final union as at least preferable to the first, Marcus Andronicus's speech works to trouble the notion that the tragedy goes nowhere.

Yet even if we focus on the problematic unification between Goth and Roman upon which the tragedy concludes, it still draws our attention away from a reality that the play cannot sufficiently hide: Shakespeare's Rome — like nearly all cultures — is inexorably and irreversibly mixed.<sup>44</sup> Once the playwright settled on bringing interracialism to the stage, he invited — however unintentionally — a view of culture that exceeded schematization in racial, cultural, or national terms. It is perhaps no wonder that no other characters marked as racially mixed appear in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama.<sup>45</sup> Some 400 years later, we still struggle markedly to conceptualize a social schematic that accounts for interracialism. As Paul Gilroy writes in *The Black Atlantic*:

Regardless of their affiliation to the right, left, or centre, groups have fallen back on the idea of cultural nationalism, on the overintegrated conceptions of culture which present immutable, ethnic differences as an absolute break in the histories and experiences of “black” and “white” people. Against this choice stands another, more difficult option: the theorisation of creolisation, métissage, mestizaje, and hybridity... These terms are rather unsatisfactory ways of naming the processes of cultural mutation and restless (dis)continuity that exceed racial discourse and avoid capture by its agents. (2)

Although it might appear like a crucial step toward “the more difficult option” of theorizing cultural heterogeneity, the predominant proclivity to foreground and exceptionalize racial mixing

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<sup>44</sup> In *The Racial State*, Goldberg is keen to remind us that racial heterogeneity “touched London life early on.” See also Fryer, Gerzina, and Habib.

<sup>45</sup> See Loomba, 52.

in fact collapses quickly back into the routines of “cultural nationalism” that Gilroy identifies. As these procedures carve out special cases of interracialism, they leave out a consideration of the vast majority of racial mixing. This chapter has demonstrated that these procedures hinge on the purported consequentiality of mixedness, and in doing so, they disregard the great bulk of racial mixing that registers as *inconsequential* on the historical scale: ubiquitous, quotidian mixing that masks itself as immutably white or non-white and thus “avoid[s] capture” by the dominant gaze.

We do not need to be asked to “behold the child” of Aaron and Tamora’s interracial relationship. We are predisposed to do so. And in focusing on it, we have a tendency to expound upon it. We consider its meaning and consequence to the cultural landscape of the play and to the early modern English culture that produced it. But lost in our attention to this child is our grasp on the larger picture of interracialism.

A start to a more comprehensive line of inquiry might begin by asking what the afterlife is for the mixed race child of Muliteus, the half-Moorish infant that, as Aaron tells us, is as “fair” (4.2.153) as a Goth. Even in the fictional world of *Titus*, it is made quite clear that such a child might easily pass into white culture. What of that child’s children? Would there be any way to track that particular legacy of racial intermixture, especially if his descendants were as light skinned as him? Would this type of mixing be consequential? Could it ever be expounded upon by someone like George Best, or coopted by someone like Marcus Andronicus?

If we extrapolate this line of questioning to what the early modern archive offers, we open the door to the “processes of cultural mutation and restless (dis)continuity” of Gilroy’s formulation. In short, we open the door to an incalculable nexus of ethnic heterogeneity. What, we might ask, happens to the mixed children of Mary and Christian in sixteenth century Plymouth? How many other women and children like them existed but do not show up in the

archive? How many of these interracial relationships produce children that pass for white? Do those children go on to live as white people? What about their children? What, if any, are the perceptible effects of such mixing?

These questions only gloss one aspect in an inestimable variety of ways in which cultures are irrevocably mixed. But before we can broach such inquiries, we must first engage the cycle of representation and reception that elides a more comprehensive history of racial intermixture. And contingently, we must reckon with the complicity between the prevalent cycle of erasure and the workings of a dominant culture. Marcus Andronicus peddles Tamora and Aaron's child to the Roman populous to the elision of his more consequential cultural and political maneuvers. Early modern and American culture's shared fixation with the transgressive narrative of black male-white female relationships displaces the historical primacy of coercive white male-black female relationships to a legacy of racial mixing. Post-racial investments in the newness of interracialism obscure the deeper history of racial heterogeneity.

If there is a lagging historical compass of racial intermixture in early modern England, we might see the root of this impediment by looking at moments where the issue is foregrounded and recognizing that such moments are more apt to obscure than elucidate. To more accurately attune our historical gaze, we should no longer look at what *Titus*'s most visible interracialism shows us; we must, instead, see what it hides from us.

## AFTERWORD

### Zora Neale Hurston and Humoral Theory

In 1926, Zora Neale Huston measured the head circumference of African Americans on a Harlem street corner. Her research was part of a larger project helmed by Franz Boas to dismantle the taxonomic models of scientific racism.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, her findings contributed to the developing thesis that environmental factors enacted physiological changes to the human form. Boas articulated this theory with regard to immigrants in his 1912 study *Changes in Bodily Forms of Descendants of Immigrants*, writing:

Not even those characteristics of race which have proved to be most permanent in their old home remain the same under new surroundings; and we are compelled to conclude that when these features of the body change, the whole bodily and mental make-up of the immigrants may change. These results are so definitive that, while heretofore we had the right to assume that human types are stable, all the evidence is in favor of a great plasticity of human types. (5)

The idea that human attributes — especially racialized traits — were not fixed was a revolutionary notion in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century. Yet such a theory should appear much older to early modernists. The geohumoral tenets that circulated into the 17<sup>th</sup>-century maintained a starkly similar thesis. According to Mary Floyd-Wilson:

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<sup>1</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois also collaborated with Boas in an effort to undo scientific notions of race. See Baker, esp. 99-126.

Ethnic distinctions in the early modern period were necessarily plastic. Given the sheer number of variables in the external world (diet, environment, clothing) and the multiple cultural agents (government, travel, custom, performance, education, for example), people could intentionally or accidentally estrange themselves from their native kind. (54)

I discovered this unexpected similarity between early modern English concepts of race and those of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century America in my final months of writing this project. Like many literary scholars, I was captivated by Hurston's life and work. Her idiosyncratic racial politics seemed to belong to some idyllic future. In her autobiographical *Dust Tracks*, she defiantly espoused the possibility for transracial friendship in 1940s America. She trivialized "racial gags" (118) as almost equally applicable to everyone in the acting company with which she once travelled, a group comprised of "Anglo-Saxon[s], Irish, three Jews and one Negro" (118). And even while she identified herself and others by race, she defiantly rejected the definitional confines of racial groupings, asserting of black people that "there is no possible classification so catholic that it will cover us all, except My People! My People!" (192). As an early modernist, I was doubly interested in Hurston's perspectives because they also seemed to speak to the distant past. The early modern field continues to examine the viability of interethnicity between the Renaissance English and those they deemed ethnic others. It situates England's relationship to the concept of difference through the country's sometimes similar racialization of African, Irish, Jewish, and, indeed, English people, among others. And it navigates the historical indeterminacy of terms like "Moor" and "Negro."

I wanted to know what types of experiences engendered Hurston's unusual view in a moment that was so clearly racist. Of course, with Hurston, there is rarely an easy answer. More

often, there is only fascinating or confounding complexity. So when my research brought me to Boas's theory of human plasticity and Hurston's involvement therein, I knew I had only come to better understand one node in the nexus that was Hurston's iconoclastic life. But while this aspect of Hurston's life was certainly complex, I did not find the Boasian theory to which she contributed especially perplexing. My training as an early modernist had acquainted me with a variety of ostensibly bizarre conceptions of difference, including early modern geohumoral theory, the historical approximate to Boas's concept.

I began this dissertation during what Peter Erickson and Kim F. Hall refer to as the "mixed phase" in early modern race studies, when there was a "curtailment or abandonment of political focus" and "growth" was inherently "accompanied by sacrifice" (4). The notion of pursuing a graduate education investigating viable connections between the early modern and African American fields felt professionally precarious, regardless of how essential I understood such a concentration to be. Much of the field was rightly focused on historical particularization, but it often pursued this interest in ways that omitted the particulars of black experience. Rather than abandon this project early in its conception, I followed the research model set by those early modern race scholars whose work had encouraged me in the first place. In conjunction with pursuing my primary project, I sought to better understand the routines of obstruction that made it difficult for black analyses to gain traction in early modern studies. As is often the case if one hopes to center a marginalized position, I was required to first make visible those normative modes of thinking that often unknowingly work against the non-dominant view.

There has been an appreciable shift in the field since I began this project. The conversation on race in early modern studies has expanded, and leading venues in the field have made a point to feature non-dominant forms of analysis and earnestly consider questions of



diversity and representation. Among other important breakthroughs, *Shakespeare Quarterly* published a special issue on early modern race studies in 2016 – edited by Erickson and Hall – which identified the “mixed phase” and called for scholarly progress. And the Shakespeare Association of America’s 2017 conference held a plenary entitled “The Color of Membership,” which confronted the challenges facing attempts at diversity and inclusion in the field. History cautions that in order for marginalized perspectives to maintain a platform, an earnest critique of normative modes of thought must continue. But in moments where the field is receptive to non-dominant analyses, there is increased possibility for new and more ambitious research, if not simply because even a little less energy must be devoted to making space for such research to be heard. In such a critical climate, more expansive investigations into broader fields of race studies can be pursued. And the particularities of race as understood from the margins can be extensively explored.

Bolstered by the new critical atmosphere in early modern studies, I pursued further research about Hurston. Immediately, her work with Boas reaffirmed this dissertation’s contention that important and operative similarities exist between early modern England and post-Abolition America. Yet it also brought to mind the potential for collaboration within early modern studies, specifically between scholars invested in broader concepts of race and those who rigorously explore the particularities of early modern notions of ethnicity. Geohumoral theories of plasticity are traditionally considered a historical concept that differentiates Renaissance England from subsequent racial histories. But a focus on the specificities of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century racial concepts and the African American involvement therein suggests that notions of racial plasticity might actually link early modern England to a later moment.

Such distinct affinities invite more rigorous interdisciplinary work and dialogue. African Americanists have long pondered Hurston's work with Boas and its impact on her racial politics. How might their research help early modernists better understand the influence of theories of human plasticity on Renaissance England's approaches to ethnic others? Indeed, what other ostensibly discrete critical conversations are ongoing in other disciplines that might compliment conversations in early modern race studies? And what research into the specificities of early modern concepts of ethnicity stand to enrich the broader fields of critical race studies? In order to answer these questions, early modern studies must continue to encourage interdisciplinarity as a necessary means of exploring issues of race. It must persist in expanding its critical purview by supporting investigations into diverse and seemingly disparate areas of study, especially those that thoroughly consider a view from the margins.

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