



“I saw a terrific white play last night”: Integrated Casting in Iqbal Khan’s Othello and Keith Hamilton Cobb’s American Moor

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“I saw a terrific white play last night”:

Integrated Casting in Iqbal Khan’s *Othello* and Keith Hamilton Cobb’s *American Moor*

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A Thesis in the Field of English

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Abstract

This thesis delves into the dynamics of integrated casting in contemporary Shakespearean theater as a means to challenge and confront entrenched systems of white supremacy. Focusing on two seminal productions—Iqbal Khan's *Othello* with the Royal Shakespeare Company and Keith Hamilton Cobb's *American Moor*—this study scrutinizes how non-traditional casting, herein termed "integrated casting," disrupts traditional racial hierarchies within the theater industry. Through a critical lens, the thesis examines the implications of casting decisions, particularly the portrayal of traditionally white characters by Black actors, and the subsequent reconfiguration of racial dynamics on stage. Central to the analysis is the deconstruction of the "white gaze" and the exposure of its role in perpetuating racial biases and power structures. By foregrounding the experiences of Black actors and interrogating the motivations behind casting choices, this study elucidates the complex interplay between race, power, and performance in contemporary Shakespearean productions. Furthermore, it sheds light on the enduring influence of colonial legacies and the ways in which integrated casting serves as a catalyst for reimagining Shakespearean narratives within the context of racial equity and social justice. Ultimately, this research seeks to provoke thought among white audiences, challenging them to confront their own racialized identities and reckon with the pervasive impact of white privilege in the theater landscape.

Keywords: integrated casting, non-traditional casting, colorblind casting, Shakespearean theater, white supremacy, anti-Blackness, racial dynamics, performance studies, critical race studies, racial equity.

Dedication

To Tyler and Logan

Acknowledgments

The seed for this thesis was formed in a small classroom, where eight students gathered at a roundtable to debate the question, “Are Shakespeare’s plays universal?” The course was titled Global Shakespeare, and in it, we discussed the “universality” of *Hamlet*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *Othello*. Professor Leah Whittington, thank you for inspiring me to continue learning and asking questions about Shakespeare and race. Your engaging lectures, lively class discussions, and encouragement to inquire and investigate kept me thinking about your class long after the classroom was empty. You gave me the seed for this thesis, but you also gave me a lasting spirit of research and a mind filled with questions, which are precious gifts that I am deeply grateful for.

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Chapter I.

Othello, Race, and Casting

Othello is a play that explores, among other themes, the dynamics of race in Shakespeare's time. Although the concept of race in early seventeenth-century Europe was much more fluid than it is in our time—and, as Ania Loomba describes in "The Vocabularies of Race," possessing a different set of implications—racism certainly existed (34). Scholar Eldred Jones showed that the Elizabethan Englishmen saw the natives of Africa as "barbarous, treacherous, libidinous, and jealous" (11). In 1551, England began a merchant relationship with the North African region of Barbary. Their relationship, however, was kept as a private one: "the heathen hand, though welcomed against Spain, was rarely taken in public" (Orkin 167). In addition to prejudice against African "Moors" in social relations, prejudiced attitudes were reflected in literature. Loomba observes that "the question of skin color was a vexed one in medieval as well as early modern writings—writers repeatedly debated the nature of the connection between skin color and inner being, sometimes suggesting an overlap between blackness and immorality" (36). After visiting Africa, author and explorer Thomas Herbert wrote that the people there were "Devilish savages" and "Devils incarnate" (136). Indeed, the *Oxford English Dictionary* denotes connotations of the word "black" from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which include "very evil or wicked; iniquitous; foul, hateful" and "having or demonstrating evil intent; malignant, deadly; sinister."

In *Othello*, through the tragic undoing of its titular character—the "noble Moor"—Shakespeare presents an ambiguous representation of race, a representation

which has been debated and pondered over the past four-hundred years (144). Strikingly, responses to the play after the initial performances in the early and mid-seventeenth century did not even mention color, but rather observed the play as a tragedy of jealousy (Neill, "Introduction" 1-10). Beginning in the twentieth century, race has dominated critical conversations about *Othello* ("Introduction" 16-18). "*Othello* is about colour, and nothing but colour," said a character in a 1969 reimagining of the play (Carlin 31-32). One of the topics of critical debate centers on the issue of *Othello* encouraging a negative racial stereotype of African Moors. In 1987, Martin Orkin pointed out that the racial epithets are limited to the characters Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio, and those characters are discredited, thus aligning the play in a position of opposing racial stereotypes (166). However, Michael Neill refuted such a neat conclusion of the play, arguing that Iago's mesmerizing soliloquys ensnare the audience in his racist views ("Introduction" 121). I agree with Neill's interpretation, and I also agree with Virginia Vaughan, who insisted that the play's racial attitudes cannot be easily resolved:

I think the play is racist, and I think it is not. But *Othello*'s example shows me that if I insist on resolving the contradiction, I will forge only lies and distortions... the discourse of racial difference is inescapably embedded in this play just as it was embedded in Shakespeare's culture and our own. (*Contextual History* 69-70)

In the twenty-first century, with the world's deeply racist history rooted in imperialism and African slavery, critics are using *Othello* as a platform to explore current racial issues. Ian Smith warned that literary critics are not immune from the cultural prejudices of white dominance that underlie both the play and society as a whole. Smith interprets *Othello*'s savage behavior as his being "framed within the brutal cultural logic of a racist hegemony" and "punish[ing] a racialized self" ("We Are *Othello*" 111). He suggests that *Othello*'s blackness marks him as an outsider, causing white audiences,

readers, and scholars to resist identifying with him. He poignantly asks, “despite *Othello*’s potent political relevance for today, where are the voices proclaiming, ‘It is *we* who are Othello’?” (107).

One production answered this question. In 2015, Iqbal Khan directed a production of *Othello* with the Royal Shakespeare Company which made Othello into a character with whom audiences could more easily identify by mitigating racial stereotypes that characterize him. Khan took *Othello* and made it relevant to modern-day issues of racial experience. He expressed that he wanted the audience to feel like the play “genuinely speaks to their concerns and anxieties about the world as it is now” (*Shakespeare Unlimited*). In this thesis, I argue that through Khan’s casting and directorial choices help *Othello* resonate with audience members’ individual racial experiences. Khan’s choices emphasize the theme of the racial outsider, and his creative modifications bring contemporary racial tension to the forefront while distancing the play from historical anti-Black racist stereotypes. In doing so, Khan reclaims *Othello* in a way that speaks to the twenty-first century and allows audiences to proclaim, “*we* are Othello.”

Chapter II.

Race and Integrated Casting

The concept of “race” as we understand it today, as a physical marker of social differences, may or may not have existed in Shakespeare’s time. As I noted in the introduction to this thesis, Ania Loomba, in “The Vocabularies of Race,” argues that the concept of race Shakespeare’s time was more fluid and broadly-defined than it is in our time. In the chapter, which was published in 2002, Loomba contends that the word “race” was not part of the vocabulary in Shakespeare’s day, though elements of hierarchical differences existed to keep a dominant group in power. She asserts that in the Renaissance period, the idea of race was more of a combination of factors, including lineage, faith, nation, gender, sexuality, class, and skin color (“Vocabularies” 35).

Twenty years after Loomba expressed uncertainty about the level of significance skin color factored in as a feature of “race” in seventeenth-century Europe, Ayanna Thompson advocated with certainty that the idea of race as a form of color-based discrimination existed in Shakespeare’s time. In her chapter “Did the Concept of Race Exist for Shakespeare and His Contemporaries?”, Thompson illustrates how scholarly understandings of race have changed over the last few decades. She relates her experience as a college student in the 1990s. Her Shakespeare professor taught her class the predominant belief about race held by the academic community during that time—that early modern conceptions of race did not pertain to a person’s skin color. Thompson notes that since then, the scholarly consensus has evolved. She writes, “If you ask today in the 2020s if the concept of race existed for Shakespeare and his contemporaries, the answer is an emphatic yes” (3).

Although Thompson mentions that the updated understanding of race in Shakespeare's time has been influenced in part by newly-unearthed historical archives, she attributes the updated scholarship to new theoretical frameworks of reference. In *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race*, edited by Thompson, scholars underscore a modern consensus that the world Shakespeare navigated was intimately intertwined with imperialistic practices. Not only were explorers entering newfound territories, but they were also setting up systems of exploitation that included skin color as a differentiating factor.

Thompson highlights the few scholarly voices from the mid-to-late 20th century that emphasized a connection between race and skin color during Shakespeare's time. For instance, Martin Orkin highlights anti-Black color prejudice by noting an English proverb that was popular in the 1600s: "Three Moors to a Portuguese; Three Portuguese to an Englishman" (167). Additionally, Eldred Jones uses artistic examples from early 17th-century English artists to demonstrate that Englishmen showed not only an interest in Africa from a symbolic perspective but also a fascination with African characters from a material perspective (Jones 5). Clearly, as shades of skin color move from light to dark, Englishmen in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries believed that the value of a person diminished. Thus, England during Shakespeare's time held racist attitudes that were inextricably linked with skin color.

Racism, Racecraft, and Race

The definition of "race" in Shakespeare's time is discussed with so much depth in Shakespeare scholarship because "race" is something that is socially constructed—it

doesn't actually exist at all. Ayanna Thompson explains the concept of race as we understand it today:

So, what exactly is race? Let me begin by saying that race is *not* a biological, scientific, or genetic reality. Race is a fiction. I'll repeat: race is not a real thing... The idea that race is a stable, identifiable, biological trait comes from pseudo-scientific arguments that were created in the Enlightenment. These late-seventeenth-century arguments were subsequently adopted and weaponized throughout much of the world to create disparities based on those pseudo-scientific notions of essential differences. ("Concept of Race" 5)

Thompson references Geraldine Heng, who elucidates, "race has no singular or stable referent" because "race is a structural relationship for the articulation and management of human differences rather than substantive content" (Heng 19). In other words, groups of people made up the idea of "race" as a way to legitimize social hierarchies.

While race is a fiction, the *creation* of race as a result of and justification for *racism* is very real. Sociologist Karen E. Fields and her sister, historian Barbara J. Fields, coined the term "racecraft" to connote the construction of race by social processes. Importantly, they point out that racecraft ensures that "privileges will be limited to the non-raced" (Fields and Fields 17). Thus, when one group uses racecraft on another group, it is the "raced" group that is denied privileges, while the "non-raced" group maintains dominance.

Thompson confirms the reality of racism by making an important distinction: "Race does not exist, but racism does" ("Concept of Race" 7). She asserts that "racism produces race as a concept," so racism *precedes* race (8). She quotes Fields and Fields as they highlight the concealed relationship between racecraft and racism: "Indeed, the most consequential of the illusions racecraft underwrites is concealing the affiliation between

racism and inequality in general” (Fields and Fields 261). In this way, racecraft, the creative act of assigning negative traits to a group based on their skin color, becomes difficult to detect. Racist attitudes perpetuate false beliefs that race is real

In theater during Shakespeare’s time, scholar Patricia Akhimie outlines in her essay “Racist Humor and Shakespearean Comedy” that not only did plays like *Othello* share color-based racist jokes, but many of Shakespeare plays also employed color-based racist humor to establish racial inequalities (48). Additionally, it is significant to note that whiteness was also constructed as a race during Shakespeare’s time. Arthur Little, Jr., in his essay “Is it Possible to Read Shakespeare through Critical White Studies?”, analyzes the unnatural creation of whiteness through its contrast with Blackness (270). Although racecraft tends to place focus on the formation of Blackness as a race, it is important to avoid the trap of distancing whiteness from being racialized, for it is the unraced group that holds power.

A consequence of racism and racecraft is the phenomenon of racialism, the act of “accepting and acting according to a system of so-called racial difference” (Banks, “The Welcome Table” 21). Racialism occurs when someone internalizes racist beliefs in a way that influences their attitudes, behaviors, and mannerisms. Racialism is often on display in many visual art forms, particularly in the highly visual, lively, and interactive art form of theater. It is on display when plays are performed by all-white casts. Disparities in casting representations communicate racist messages to audiences about who deserves to be seen and who does not. On this topic, Banks writes that “unequal casting perpetuates sociological and biological fictions, which create a form of ‘law’ in the cultural

imaginary” (21). Thus, casting practices in theater have the potential to reinforce racism and racialism or challenge it.

White American Racial Attitudes

When an audience member views a theater performance, they experience representations of race that confirm, challenge, or deny their racial identity. The audience member might have one of three experiences: (1) they see their race on stage, portrayed in ways they are comfortable with; (2) they see their race on stage, portrayed in ways they are uncomfortable with; or (3) they do not see their race on stage. I now turn to white American theater-goers as a demographic group and their perceptions of race in a play.

When discussing an entire demographic of people, it is important to balance generalizations and variations within that group. Certainly, in order to study group attitudes and behaviors, identifying overall trends is useful to understand the group as a whole. At the same time, within a group as large as millions of individuals, people come to the table with different viewpoints and backgrounds. It is important to avoid lumping together all individuals as a uniform group without qualifying that differences exist in that group. In this section, I provide scholarly context for white American racial experiences and attitudes in order to foreground my arguments about white theater-goers’ perceptions of integrated casting.

In *Racism without Racists*, race scholar Eduardo Bonilla-Silva examines white American racial attitudes based on hundreds of long-form interviews his researchers led with white Americans ages 18-65 in midwestern America. Conducted in the 2000s and updated in 2018, the scholarly analysis gained traction for its findings on what Bonilla-

Silva termed “new racism,” or “color-blind racism.” In contrast to the overt racism of Jim Crow America, color-blind racism is a collective and individual attitude of racism that characterized by covert methods of maintaining white supremacist structures. White supremacy, Bonilla-Silva argues, is not a collection of isolated racist acts. Rather, white supremacy is a set of systems. Bonilla-Silva defines white supremacy in the following way: “Racialized social systems, or white supremacy for short, became global and affected all societies where Europeans extended their reach. I therefore conceive a society’s racial structure as *the totality of the social relations and practices that reinforce white privilege*” (9). He presents a paradox central to the race problems facing America today. White Americans do not wish to see themselves as “racist,” and yet stark inequalities persist between Black and white Americans in ways that benefit white Americans. He explains:

Nowadays, except for members of white supremacist organizations, few whites in the United States claim to be “racist.” Most whites assert they “don’t see any color, just people”; that although the ugly face of discrimination is still with us, it is no longer the central factor determining minorities’ life chances; and, finally, that, like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., they aspire to live in a society where “people are judged by the content of their character, not by the color of their skin.” (1)

Despite white Americans’ desire to distance themselves from the label “racist,” white Americans continue to possess racial advantages while Black Americans are held “at the bottom of the well” (2). For example, Black Americans are three times more likely to be poor than whites; Black-owned homes are valued at 35 percent less than comparable white-owned homes; Black Americans are targets of racial profiling by police officers, which can have criminal or fatal consequences; and racial gerrymandering segregates Black Americans and politically disenfranchises them (2-3). Bonilla-Silva shows that white racial ideologies extend across political affiliations, and white privilege is

maintained by whites even among other discriminated groups within the white American population. Bonilla-Silva contends that even among those with varying levels of privilege due to “class, gender, sexual orientation,” and other classifications like disability status, all individuals in the “dominant racial position” benefit from what Charles W. Mills calls the “racial contract,” and because of this, “*most* have historically endorsed the ideas that justify the racial status quo” (10).

Bonilla-Silva points out that “although not every single member of the dominant race defends the racial status quo or spouts color-blind racism, *most* do” (10). In the same way that not every man defends patriarchy and not every capitalist defends capitalism, “although some whites fight white supremacy and do not endorse white common sense, *most* subscribe to the substantial portions of it in a casual, uncritical fashion that helps sustain the prevailing racial order” (10). Generalizations of white audience perspectives will never be completely monolithic. However, based on white Americans’ naturally vested interest in keeping their privileges, I agree with Bonilla-Silva’s findings and contend that *most* white Americans—including “color-blind liberal and progressive whites” (13)—share a set of racial ideologies that inform their viewing experiences of theater productions.

While large-scale studies like those contained in *Racism without Racists* have looked at white American racial ideologies, scholarship is limited about the narrower demographic of white theater-goers and their specific reactions to productions that use integrated casting. In her chapter “(How) Should We Listen to Audiences? Race, Reception, and the Audience Survey,” Ayanna Thompson considers trends in audience members’ responses to Shakespeare productions with diverse casts. Thompson analyzes

500 archived audience surveys conducted in the 1980s by the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF). She specifically focuses on a production of *Romeo and Juliet*, in which the lead roles were played by non-white actors. The production occurred in 1988, a year in which 97 percent of the OSF audience was white. Although Thompson reports that a single respondent advocated for “hiring minorities” and “more blind casting,” audience members expressed disappointment about the “modernization” of the play. One patron complained that the OSF “needed [a] better brochure comment to warn people of [its] modernization”; another protested that it “often seems as if editorials [are] being acted on stage” (164). Further, one patron asked, “Why, oh why, when the festival is advertised as the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and already includes four contemporary plays, does one of the Shakespeare plays have to be corrupted in this way?” (164-65). Thompson argues that “rhetoric about ‘modernization,’ ‘interpretation,’ ‘editorials,’ and the lack of ‘period costumes’... is actually coded language for the audience’s discomfort with the non-traditional casting being employed” (164).

Of course, the audience responses captured in these surveys is nearly 35 years old at the time of this writing, and one might argue that too much has changed politically for these racially-coded responses to be relevant. However, I apply Bonilla-Silva’s research concerning the through-line of white supremacy in which the core motivations remain consistent (maintaining white privilege) but the language and mechanisms of upholding the privileges change.

With Bonilla-Silva’s research and Thompson’s research as foundational elements of my arguments concerning white racial ideologies, I continue my project with the informed assumption that *most* white theater-goers in America uncritically expect that

their race will be represented in a theater performance. I maintain that not only can white theater-goers expect themselves to be represented, but they also can expect that white characters will be shown as individuals rather than as representations of their race. I argue that these expectations are privileges that most Black theater-goers do not share. In upcoming sections, I explore and interrogate how Black theater professionals have sought to address problems of underrepresentation and misrepresentation of Black people on American stages by challenging casting methods that have historically favored overrepresentation of white people.

Casting Decisions in Theater

Casting, the practice of selecting actors for roles in a play, involves decision-making that includes the power to choose who will be seen on stage. More abstractly, Antonio Glenn underscores the implications of the casting process by defining casting as “an ongoing communal process of authorizing representation” (414). Prior to the 1940s, the American theater industry communally authorized representation for white actors only. Although Black directors, actors, and playwrights established theaters to nurture and showcase their creativity and talent, they remained invisible in the mainstream theater.

The tide began to turn in the 1950s, when theater director Joseph Papp began hiring non-white actors in his popular outdoor performance series, the New York Shakespeare Festival (now called Shakespeare in the Park). Papp’s casting choices sparked a revolutionary practice of “non-traditional casting.” Beginning with casting a Black actress in the lead role of *Taming of the Shrew*, Papp seemed to transform theater

overnight, as white spectators were drawn to the performances, despite previous resistance to viewing Black actors on stage (Pao 69-70).

As I discuss these types of casting methods in my thesis, I will predominantly use the term “integrated casting,” proposed by theater director Daniel Banks (Banks 9-14). In my thesis, I argue that there are several pitfalls in the ways white directors have made efforts to cast non-white actors, but Iqbal Khan’s casting choices in his 2015 production of *Othello* embody what Shakespeare scholars and those in the theater industry value most about the goals of the integrated casting movement. Scholars and theater professionals hope that updated casting practices will reform a theater industry rooted in racism and exclusion. On the level of audience members, Black theater professionals hope that integrated casting will allow Black theater-goers to see themselves represented on stage in ways that are individualistic and free of stereotypes. From a social justice standpoint, integrated casting also allows Black actors, directors, and playwrights to get hired, obtain positions of leadership, and have their voices heard. As I will demonstrate, integrated casting in Khan’s *Othello* with the Royal Shakespeare Company fulfills these values by increasing representation of Black people on stage and opening up opportunities for Black actors to be hired by predominantly-white theater institutions, improving equality and the range and quality of theater as an artistic medium.

History of Black Actors’ Relationships with the Role of Othello

When Shakespeare wrote *Othello* in the early 1600s, he most likely never envisioned that the titular role would be played by a Black actor. In Shakespeare’s time, all characters in plays were performed by white men or boys, including female roles and characters of color. In 1833, more than two hundred years after the play’s first

performance, Ira Aldridge became the first Black actor to play the role of Othello, beginning a new era for the play. Due to limited opportunities for Black Americans in the theater industry, Aldridge emigrated from America to Britain. He was hired as an understudy to a white actor playing Othello. When the white actor tragically died on stage mid-performance, Aldridge stepped in (Hovde). White audiences and theater critics protested Aldridge's performance, upset that a Black actor took the stage. However, as Aldridge toured continental Europe, white audiences and critics overwhelmingly welcomed him. When he returned to London in 1855, Aldridge was lauded by whites for his acting (Hovde).

By breaking through a barrier that had excluded Black actors from performing in Shakespeare productions, Aldridge served as a pioneer for future Black actors, who for years had been relegated to humiliating roles in minstrel shows. Infused with the overt racism of post-slavery America, minstrel shows were America's first formal theatrical tradition ("Blackface"). In a minstrel show, an actor enacts Black stereotypes by singing, dancing, and performing skits. Initially, minstrel shows were performed by white actors in blackface makeup. The shows denigrated Black people by creating and perpetuating harmful stereotypes, portraying them as "lazy, ignorant, superstitious, hypersexual, and prone to thievery and cowardice" ("Blackface"). Most notable of these stereotypical characters was Jim Crow, an exaggerated, foolish character that captured the attention and adoration of thousands of white Americans ("Blackface"). Over time, Black Americans began performing as the humiliating characters, establishing a pervasive and long-lasting expectation in white American theater that Black actors were only to be laughed at. Thus, when Aldridge gained entry into the gated white Shakespeare industry,

performing in respectable roles, many Black Americans celebrated his acting achievements as progress for Black American rights.

Indeed, performing in Shakespeare plays became a weapon in African Americans' fight for civil rights. More than one hundred years after Aldridge's breakthrough acting career, the second Black actor to play Othello took America by storm. In 1943, actor and political activist Paul Robeson played the titular role in New York, performing for a run of 296 shows, which still holds the record for the longest-running Shakespeare play on Broadway (*Paul Robeson* 8). Unlike Aldridge's hostile reception after his debut, Robeson's first performance was met with a standing ovation that lasted twenty minutes (8). Robeson's performances solidified new expectations that the role of Othello belonged in the domain of Black actors.

However, Black actors' ownership over the role of Othello brought a new set of complications. Othello is the only leading Shakespeare role written specifically as a Black character. Unless otherwise specified in Shakespeare's scripts, if no indications of racial identity are noted, characters are assumed to be white. Thus, if a Black male actor wanted to perform in Shakespeare, he essentially needed to play Othello, for white directors defaulted to casting all other leading Shakespeare roles as white actors. So, while at the time, this newfound access to a classical theatrical role supported Black power and justice, as history continued, what was once a stunning achievement changed into a glaring symbol of limitations for Black actors. In this way, the casting dynamic perpetuated negative stereotypes of Blackness and increased pressure on Black actors to be performative for white audiences.

Integrated Casting Methods in Shakespearean Theater

A deeply significant moment of integrated casting was an instance in which a white lead actor had a Black understudy. The event was in 1992 at the Royal Shakespeare Company in a performance of *Cleopatra*. At a time when all-white casts were ubiquitous, Black actress Claire Benedict played Cleopatra one night to fill in for the white actress Clare Higgins (Thompson, “Shadowing Cleopatra” 60). Surprisingly, the performance did not garner special attention by white theater critics and audience members. The event sparked Benedict’s successful career in acting. On a larger scale, the event marked an important moment of achievement for Black actors who strove to participate in classical Shakespeare productions. If a Black actress could assume the lead role in place of a white actress and experience a neutral reception by white critics and audiences, what kinds of casting opportunities might be possible for Black actors in a white-dominated theater industry?

The history of casting in American Shakespeare productions, and the scholarly discussions around that history, reveal theater professionals’ and scholars’ varied responses to the problem of underrepresentation and misrepresentation of Black actors on stage. Although in the seventeenth century, Shakespeare’s plays were performed by nearly all-white casts—with actors who would paint their faces black to play Black characters—today, it is not uncommon for Shakespeare productions to have racially diverse casts. Changes in casting methods for Shakespeare productions have sparked lively scholarly discourse that overlaps across disciplines including Shakespeare studies, critical race studies, performance studies, and critical white studies. When we study

productions that use integrated casting, we learn more about new possibilities for a play's meaning, while moving towards a more equitable and just theater industry.

The scholarly conversation in the U.S. around race, casting, and Shakespeare took off in the 1980s, when Harry Newman and Clinton Turner Davis co-founded the Non-Traditional Casting Project (NTCP) (Pao 4). In 1986, the national US actors' union Actors' Equity published the results of a four-year survey, finding that 90 percent of professional American theater during those years was performed by all-white casts (8). Upon learning these results, Newman and Davis hosted the first national Non-Traditional Casting Symposium in November 1986 (8). The NTCP sought to increase the representation of actors of color in American theater productions.

The NTCP officially coined the term “non-traditional casting” in 1988. The casting approach included not only race, but also other aspects of identity that actors were being discriminated against. Newman and Davis defined non-traditional casting as “the casting of ethnic, female or disabled actors in roles where race, ethnicity, gender or physical capability are not necessary to the characters' or play's development” (Pao 1). Although supportive of this inclusive casting practice, playwright and professor Anna Deavere Smith expressed concern with the term “non-traditional”:

I hate that term non-traditional casting. I believe that the kind of casting we are talking about is traditional casting... I would prefer to isolate what 90 percent of our theaters are doing as non-traditional casting, since it does not represent what America is—the American people. (Pao 1)

The terminology for “non-traditional casting” has never been fully agreed upon by those in the performing arts. A variety of terms have been used, including “color-blind,” “color-conscious,” “multiracial,” “multiethnic,” “multicultural,” “diverse,” “inclusive,” “integrated,” and more. Although Harry Newman urged proponents of

integrated casting to avoid spending energy fixating on terminology (Pao 5), in 2013, theater director Daniel Banks addressed the importance of language to influence culture and perception. In “*The Welcome Table: Casting for an Integrated Society*,” Banks proposes an update to the term “non-traditional.” As an alternative, he offers “integrated” casting. He argues that “integrated” does not privilege one racial group over another (3). He illuminates the flawed notion that people should be categorized based on race, for not only is there no biological basis for race, but it is also impossible to discern another’s racial identity by looking at them. A person’s race may be imperceptible. Additionally, someone may not appear as someone in their racial group “typically” looks. Due to this, Banks defines racism as “discrimination according to a *presumed* race, often based on appearance” (20). Banks’s definition highlights the inability for someone to accurately know another person’s racial identity.

Banks discusses the term “color-blind” casting, which playwright Jocelyn A. Brown described as “problematic” and misunderstood. Brown expressed that “much of what is labeled color-blind theater is, in actuality, color-conscious theater” (qtd. in Banks 3). Brown advocated for more nuanced casting practices built from a stronger foundational understanding of history and sociology—one that does not conflate race, ethnicity, culture, and class—with the result being broadened casting possibilities (Banks 3). Agreeing with Brown’s advocacy for a more complex casting practice, Banks asserts that by casting and producing theater with background knowledge of history and sociology, directors can create “multiple intersecting narratives of our society” (3), an outcome that would enrich the experiences of everyone involved.

In the 2010s, supporters of the concept saw the casting style as a form of social justice against the impacts of white supremacy; yet, as integrated casting gained popularity, the movement was met with fierce opposition (Pao 2). Many white audience members believed casting non-white actors “distracted” from the play, diminished the artistic quality, or attempted to be needlessly “political” (2). White resistance to changes in casting practices was expected. However, in order for integrated casting to gain traction, it was essential that white stakeholders get on board with the idea. White Americans had the influence and money needed to turn fringe casting choices into a mainstream practice.

Theater director Justin Emeka advocated for directors not only to cast Black actors in Shakespeare plays, but also to incorporate cultural perspectives of Black actors in the production process. As a director, Emeka took issue with “colorblind” casting because it “employ[ed] Black actors to perform roles written for White actors without incorporating Black culture” (39). Rather than merely subbing out a white actor for a Black actor—in plays that “explore and celebrate some variation of white life”—it is imperative, according to Emeka, to engage with actors from a standpoint of listening and co-creating (39).

In 2018, the Globe Theater in England hosted the first annual Shakespeare and Race Festival, which convened Shakespeare scholars from around the world. In a seminar titled Shakespeare and Black America, participants discussed issues of reading and performing Shakespeare plays, “not as an agent of cultural dominion, but as part of resistance and activism in Black America” (Cahill and Hall 1). The topic of race and Shakespeare continues to evolve in scholarly conversations. Every year since 2018, the

Shakespeare Association of America (SAA) has convened seminars about race and Shakespeare where multi-disciplinary discussions thrive.

However, while scholars engaged in lively discussions about integrated casting, change in casting practices was slow. NTCP co-founder Harry Newman wrote an account of his unfruitful efforts to change the hearts and minds of white theater directors. In “Holding Back: The Theater’s Resistance to Non-Traditional Casting,” Newman paints an image of white directors who are eager to engage with him in conversation about integrated casting but reluctant to act. Newman highlights how people with dark skin are deemed as belonging to a race, while white people’s race is an invisible standard: “We speak of actors and then of ethnic actors, as though they were different kinds... If someone said, ‘I saw a terrific white play last night,’ it would sound ludicrous. Why is it acceptable the other way around?” (27). White people’s refusal to be racialized aids in maintaining their privilege. Newman astutely observes what everyone in the non-traditional casting movement is keenly aware of: “the deeper resistance to non-traditional casting is a reflection of the racism, sexism, and prejudice operating within our society itself” (28). Still, Newman remains optimistic in the face of resistance. He frames integrated casting in a positive light for his readers: “We have an opportunity to ‘re-cast’ American performing arts... We can create performing arts which uniquely reflect the complexity of American society” (35). That goal benefits all participants in the theater industry and enriches the experiences of actors and audiences of all racial backgrounds.

While many artists in Black theater communities viewed integrated casting as an opportunity for greater inclusion and representation of America’s multicultural society, some viewed the goal as misguided. In his famous 1996 speech “The Ground on Which I

Stand,” playwright August Wilson called for Black artists to create separate theater institutions that would perform plays written by Black playwrights. He criticized integrated casting for placing Black bodies in roles used to express white perspectives. He demanded that funding be given to Black-run theaters, which would allow Black actors to improve their talent. In his speech, Wilson scathingly criticizes the motivations behind the new casting style: “Colorblind casting is an aberrant idea that has never had any validity other than as a tool of the Cultural Imperialists” (5). Despite disagreements in Black theater communities over Wilson’s ideas, most Black Americans shared a common goal of promoting Black artists and fighting against white supremacy in American theater.

In 1997, discontent about the lack of progress in American theater continued, expressed clearly in a letter by NTCP co-founder Clinton Turner Davis. Published in the *African American Review*, the letter echoes Newman’s frustration about the white directors paying lip service to diverse casting without making real change. Davis’s language is more direct and confrontational than Newman’s, reflecting a trend of increasingly bold conversations about race in America. Davis challenges white directors to side with racism or antiracism: “Either you actively participate in changing the artistic landscape or you don’t. Either you come out of the closet of your own racism and face it, or you wait for it to trip you up in yet another embarrassing moment” (591). With an irritated and sarcastic tone, Davis notes how the National Endowment for the Arts poured “diversity dollars” into white theater institutions in order to attract more diverse casts and audiences, an effort he describes with the savior language “missionary” (593). He exposes the issue of white people’s claims to be “colorblind”: “The strategy of avoiding

race—"I don't care if you are black, brown, yellow, red, green, or purple; I try to get along with everybody"—embeds meaningful differences among non-meaningful ones. When was the last time you saw a purple person?" (594). The discomfort white people experienced when confronted about their white privilege and their instilled racial prejudices led them to pretend that inequalities did not exist. Ultimately, Davis believes that in order to make real progress toward an inclusive theater industry, there needs to be a cultural shift within white American culture. He writes, "The end of racism needs to become the white man's burden" (593). It would require relentless work by dedicated artists to break away theater from the strong grip of white supremacy.

Scholarly conversations around integrated casting took off in the new millennium. In 2005, Antonia Grace Glenn brought to light the subversive acting style of a Chicano comedy trio called Culture Clash. The troupe, having performed in Los Angeles for twenty years, explored issues of identity by assuming the role of a fictional character and periodically breaking character, maintaining their identities as actors as a through-line connecting all of the characters they play. Glenn describes their unique performance style: "They do not disappear and transform themselves seamlessly into a range of characters" (414). Instead, they are "resisting, subverting, and hijacking" (413) their own performances as they "authorize the casting of themselves into a variety of roles that might otherwise be denied them in mainstream American theater" (414). Glenn's definition of casting as "an ongoing communal process of authorizing representation" emphasizes theater's impact on socially-constructed hierarchies (414). Culture Clash challenges the traditional appearance of theater's authorized representations through what Glenn calls "resistant casting" (416). The actors reveal their artistic form of activism as

they “repeatedly reference the erasure of artists of color from American theater” (416). More than merely presenting race as a part of one’s identity, Culture Clash emphasizes that race is something historically created for the purpose of establishing a hierarchy of power. In all of these ways, Culture Clash inspires thought from audiences and requires imaginative participation. As a non-white, politically-focused theater troupe, Culture Clash attracted audiences that were already open to experiencing their point of view. In this way, although influential in pushing forward concepts of resistant casting, Culture Clash did not provoke as much controversy or change as integrated casting within mainstream, white-centered theater organizations.

As introduced earlier in this chapter, Ayanna Thompson’s edited essay collection *Colorblind Shakespeare* served as “a substantive and excellent collection to begin the conversation” on race and performance in Shakespeare (Little, “Reviews” 38). Thompson gives a historical overview of non-traditional casting and considers how the individual acts of casting actors of color are difficult to unify into a cohesive, single practice. She proposes that non-traditional casting is “not one practice but a set of practices that are not only in competition with one another but also are deconstructing one another” (*Colorblind Shakespeare* 18). Individual casting events lead to various artistic results, varying from production to production, including more equal representation, updated meaning, improved reflection of a multicultural society, and cultural integration. However, in other circumstances, non-traditional casting can lead to clouded meaning, tokenism, and a vehicle for white expression. Indeed, the essays contained within *Colorblind Shakespeare* explore a variety of productions that use non-traditional casting,

each with a distinct effect. The complexity of race and performance leads to a web of conversations, perspectives, and actions.

Colorblind Shakespeare contains examinations and interpretations of non-traditional casting in American Shakespeare productions. Angela C. Pao considers the implications of a production of *Othello* in which the three central characters—Othello, Iago, and Emilia—are played by Black actors, instead of the traditional choice to cast Othello as Black and Iago and Emilia as white. In “Re-Casting Othello in Race and Performance,” Pao evaluates prejudice *among* Black individuals, a phenomenon called “colorism.” Colorism is a permeation of white supremacy into communities of color, in which individuals give preference and privilege to people with lighter skin tones. Pao writes,

The implicit assumption that racialized attitudes are a relevant factor only when members of different races are placed in direct opposition overlooks the structural and systemic nature of racism and its durable and pervasive effects, which are not suddenly called into being at moments of interracial contact. (36)

Pao’s essay explores the implications of how color-conscious casting functioned to explore issues of race in modern American society.

An essay in the collection which denounces integrated casting is “When Race Matters” by Shakespeare scholar Linda M. Anderson. Echoing themes from August Wilson’s speech “The Ground on Which I Stand,” Anderson criticizes integrated casting for encouraging actors of color to fit in to the white world of the play. She highlights that casting actors of colors in roles written for white actors forces actors of color to hide their cultural identity. Anderson argues that integrated casting “ultimately signifies assimilation,” erasing Black American history rather than embracing it (91). She analyzes two productions, *Macbeth* at the Globe Theater in London (2001) and *Richard III* in

Chicago (1996). She concludes that the *Macbeth* production “had its difficulties” and the *Richard III* production “was actually disturbing” in its artistic attempt to diversify the cast (44). Both productions paired multi-racial casting with fantastical and irrelevant updates that muddled the plays’ meanings. Their attempts to use “colorblind casting” failed to add any cultural updates and instead functioned merely as a visual change. In a review of *Macbeth* in *The Guardian*, theater critic Lyn Gardner remarks, “It is welcome and right that the Globe should start to experiment and move on from what was in danger of becoming museum Shakespeare, but Carroll's production doesn't even tell the story clearly” (Gardner). Anderson relates her perplexity that reviewers of both productions did not mention the topic of race, further revealing its seeming lack of importance to the plays’ updates. In relation to the other scholarly essays within the volume, Anderson’s critical view of integrated casting is an outlier. Most scholars and theater practitioners of color support non-traditional casting in the sense that it opens up additional roles for non-white actors in mainstream white productions, and scholars also support increased funding for Black-run theaters.

Further, in *Colorblind Shakespeare*, Antonio Ocampo-Guzman asserts that Shakespeare belongs to everyone, and non-white actors deserve to play roles through a lens of their own cultural identities. He elucidates, “if Shakespeare is a paradigm of human creativity, we all have a right to access him from our own identities” (132). His view resonates with the goals of Culture Clash, the Chicano comedy trio that insisted on maintaining their own identities as a through-line character. Arthur Little, Jr., responds to Ocampo-Guzman’s analysis by highlighting the limits of color-blind casting: “as a cultural practice (in the theater and outside it), colorblindness at its best can only *signal* a

discursive (and real) site where societal participants can grapple with their understanding of the relationship between race and humanness” (“Reviews” 302). Little’s point rings true: ignoring race will not eliminate racial prejudice. Rather, acknowledging differences and respecting them will help address the problem of racism.

Thompson’s influential *Colorblind Shakespeare* was followed up by Angela Pao’s study on the history of integrated casting in American theater, titled *No Safe Spaces*. The book explores productions in American theater history that make notable casting choices. Pao evaluates the artistic and political value of the casting decisions. The book explores plays written by a variety of playwrights, but she devotes a chapter specifically to productions of Shakespeare plays. In the chapter, Pao examines two productions of *Othello*. The first, a production she previously had written about in *Colorblind Shakespeare*, casts Black actors in the roles of Othello, Iago, and Emilia. Pao describes how the director, without changing the play’s text, created new backstories for the central characters. The backstories accounted for Iago’s racial prejudice toward Othello. The second production Pao looks at is the famous photo-negative production of 1997, with white actor Patrick Stewart cast as Othello and the rest of the cast played by non-white actors. The production received mixed reviews, with some critics arguing that the performance relied too much on casting choices and not enough on imaginative directorial or acting choices to convey the cultural implications of the reversed racial reality. The complaint relates to what August Wilson and others have criticized about non-traditional casting: the casting practice rents out Black bodies to tell a white story. Without allowing actors to draw from their identity and lived experiences, Pao argues,

there will be a disconnection between the actor and the character, and the performance will be deprived of its full potential for artistic expression.

In “Playing with ‘race’ in a new millennium,” theater director Justin Emeka reflects on his experience as a director who takes plays written by white playwrights and reimagines them through a cultural and racial lens of Black American experiences. Like director Daniel Banks, Emeka believes it is not enough to cast actors of color in roles traditionally reserved for white actors. Directors must incorporate different cultural lenses in the staging process. He references Banks’s discussion of the harm from Americans’ continuous discussions of race in US society: the dialogues reinforce racialism (“accepting and acting according a system of so-called racial difference”) and racism (“discrimination according to one’s presumed race, often based on appearance”) (Banks 3). When Black actors are cast in a play without incorporating Black culture, he contends, the actors become vessels to “explore and celebrate some variation of white life” (Emeka 39), and the actors will be more likely to mask their cultural identity to fit in with white culture. Emeka writes about his experience helping actors “embrace their character within their own cultural perspective” (45) when an actor is playing a character typically cast as white. Emeka helps the actor imagine another Black actor whose acting style resonates with the actor. By visualizing an example for the role beyond the character’s usual image of a white actor, the actor can overcome psychological barriers that hold them back from embodying the character. While Banks seeks to use integrated casting to reflect the multiracial society of modern times, for Emeka, “By reimagining the presence of Black and Brown life within the context of Eurocentric plays, I use theater as a tool to teach people to look for Black and Brown life where they have been trained by omission to

ignore it” (47). The key for Emeka and Banks is the element of “reimagining”—putting in work to adjust cultural elements of the play beyond casting decisions.

If Eurocentric plays, including Shakespeare’s, convey characters and themes based on a white perspective, some scholars have posed the question, why would actors and directors of color want to engage with the plays at all? Patricia A. Cahill and Kim F. Hall respond to the question in their introduction to *Shakespeare and Black America* (2020), an edited collection of essays. The essay collection originated from a seminar of the same name, hosted by the Shakespeare Association of America (SAA) during their annual conference in 2019. Cahill and Hall highlight two modes of engagement with Shakespeare many assume Black Americans to have: “embracing Shakespeare to borrow his cultural capital or rejecting Shakespeare as a mechanism of discipline and white supremacy” (3). Yet, the reality is much more nuanced, they explain. Of course, Black Americans do not share a uniform, collective view of Shakespeare. Cahill and Hall quote Peter Erickson: “Black writers’ approaches to Shakespeare have never been monolithic” (Erickson and Hall, “Scholarly Song” 4), aligned with accepting Shakespeare or rejecting him. For many, it is not the cultural capital of Shakespeare plays that draws them in—it is the language. For James Baldwin, American writer and activist, what appealed to him was “its candor, its irony, its density, and its beat: this was the authority of the language which produced me” (Baldwin 55).

While most Black Shakespeare scholars resist “bardolotry”—the act of idolizing Shakespeare as the epitome of high-brow culture within a white supremacist framework—Cahill and Hall, through their seminar and resulting essay collection, seek “to trace the at times indirect alliances of Shakespeare and black activism” (Cahill and

Hall 3). Black Americans' appropriation of and inclusion in Shakespeare productions have served as tools for their broader acceptance into US society: "Shakespeare's plays have been a key weapon in the ongoing struggle for full participation in American public life" (3). The relationships between Black Americans and Shakespeare plays have also resisted conformity to straightforward understandings. Even within a single scholarly article, an author may express conflicting reactions to Shakespeare's works. Cahill and Hall emphasize the diversity of perspectives among Black Americans, encouraging those in the academic disciplines of Shakespeare, theater, and race to embrace the multitude of views and attitudes: "The relationship between Shakespeare and black America is complex, changing, multilingual, historically contingent and transnational" (4). Indeed, to look at the relationship between Shakespeare and Black Americans is to explore and understand dynamics at work about power, art, and representation.

Chapter III.

Iqbal Khan's *Othello*

The Royal Shakespeare Company's 2015 production of *Othello*, directed by Iqbal Khan, deals with the problem of anti-Blackness in *Othello* in unique ways, by making space for Black actors in major roles and simultaneously reimagining Othello's backstory. Both of these efforts help to reduce anti-Blackness as a motivator for Iago and reduce anti-Black stereotypes with a reimagined backstory for Othello. It is important to highlight the different motivations of the Company and the director.

Casting Lucian Msamati as Iago seems to shift Iago's motivations from being racially motivated to being motivated by the other issues suggested in the play—Othello's intimate relations with Iago's wife, Emilia; Othello passing over Iago for the military role; and a seeming intrinsic evil and enjoyment of inflicting cruelty on others. One might think that this casting choice eliminates race as a motivating factor from Iago, and thus makes the play “less” racist. After all, a Black character cannot possess the same racist possibilities as can a white character. But what does it mean for the play to be “less racist”? Is the production beneficial to antiracist efforts, or is it detrimental? Many critics laud the production as defying the inherent racism of *Othello* by recasting Iago as Black. I concede that the performance pushes the needle forward towards a more integrated theater industry and media representation by adding representation of Black actors and incorporating new perspectives and voices to the story enacted in *Othello*. Additionally, I see the rippling benefits of the production's capacity to spark conversation about race and Shakespeare, in audiences, theatrical spaces, classrooms, and ivory towers. However, I contend with scholars like Eric Brinkman that the production appeases largely white

audiences by gesturing towards Blackness but ultimately perpetuating white supremacist ideas.

Background of Production

Through live performances, streamed recordings of the live production, and a film version of the production, Khan's *Othello* has reached a large-scale global audience. The RSC's 2015 production of *Othello*—the fourth *Othello* production put on by the RSC (other productions were in 1979, 1989, and 2004)—was performed in Stratford-upon-Avon at the Royal Shakespeare Theater from June through August 2015. With more than one thousand seats, the Royal Shakespeare Theater allows the RSC to perform for a significant number of audience members, many of whom travel from all over the world to see the company's live productions. In addition to the live performances, Khan's *Othello* was available to stream online during the global COVID pandemic as part of Culture in Quarantine program on BBC iPlayer from April to August 2022. The production was made into a filmed version, based on the live performance, and this version continues to be available to purchase from major sellers including Amazon and the RSC online shop.

For the RSC, the 2015 production of *Othello* is exceptionally diverse. The cast includes four Black actors (three in main cast, one in extended cast), two mixed-race actors (one in main cast, one in extended cast), and twelve white actors (six in main cast, six in extended cast). If we consider percentages of actors of color, there are 40% actors of color in the main cast and 14% in the extended cast.

Despite Khan's diverse 2015 production of *Othello*, the RSC has had a track record of paying lip service to values of diversity without casting many actors of color in their productions. In Sita Thomas's scathing portrayal of the RSC's casting practices, she

exposes the RSC for their failure to follow through with promises to increase diversity in their productions. In her article “Diverse Casting at the Royal Shakespeare Company,” Thomas describes how at the 2012 World Shakespeare Festival, the RSC gave a highly visible presentation in which ethnically diverse RSC actors waved flags of nations around the globe (475). The message that the RSC sought to portray was clear: their organization valued diversity and their cast members reflected that. However, that public show of their values seemed to be just a show. Thomas criticizes the RSC’s practices of hiring few minority actors, marginalizing actors of color in rehearsals, and incorporating cultural traditions in plays for aesthetic purposes. For instance, in *The Orphan of Zhao*, a classic 13th-century Chinese play, the RSC hired only three Chinese actors in a cast of 17 actors. The director, Gregory Doran, used “Chinese-inspired costume, set, music, and movement, as well as a Chinese boy’s face that stared out from the posters and marketing material” (479-80). However, the cultural elements were used for aesthetic purposes.

Yet, despite the RSC’s shortcomings in Doran’s *The Orphan of Zhao*, Thomas highlights how some directors, notably Iqbal Khan, have shown sincere commitment to embrace global representations and perspectives, even when the RSC Casting Director and Marketing Team dilute and even contradict these portrayals through casting decisions and playing up stereotypes for sales purposes. Khan was hired by the RSC in 2012 to direct a production of *Much Ado about Nothing* set in India. Initially, as Khan said in an interview, he was resistant to the RSC’s idea because he was concerned about using an Indian setting for the purpose of creating an “exotic” production that would perpetuate stereotypes (Thomas 481). The result was a tug and pull between Khan’s desire for authenticity and the RSC’s considerations of ticket sales. While Khan wanted to cast

actors from India, the RSC casting director, Helena Palmer, ultimately cast British South Asian actors in the roles. Further, despite Khan's dedication to representing a unique and authentic slice of Indian culture, the Marketing Department used stereotypical colors and language on their marketing materials, captioning actors' photographs with "archetypal roles indicative of Bollywood cinema," including "The Bride," "The Villain," and "The Cynic." Indeed, the Marketing Department wrote in their "Audience Development Plan" that "the appeal of Bollywood is significant and could attract a lot of attention to the production" (481). Refreshingly and encouragingly, Thomas depicts how thoroughly Khan and his Assistant Director worked to embed the actors' individual cultural experiences into core aspects of the production:

Yet this [the RSC Marketing Department's use of Bollywood stereotypes] misrepresented Khan's vision for the production; he was keen to avoid the commercialism of Bollywood and aimed to represent a contemporary slice of Delhi Culture. Kimberly Sykes, the Assistant Director, described how "[f]or every part of the play, we asked: 'what is the ritual and meaning behind the tradition?'" and then found our own way to stage it." In the rehearsal process, Khan spent time exploring each actor's personal experience of Indian weddings and incorporated this knowledge into the staging of the scene. (481)

As evidenced by a range of spirited reviews of the production, Khan's attention to detail of Indian culture "invited an important debate about contemporary experiences in South Asian communities that surpassed the use of Indian culture as an aesthetic" (481). Khan thus successfully worked with cast members of diverse backgrounds in ways that brought their authentic experiences into the production.

In contrast, white British director Gregory Doran's productions of *The Orphan of Zhao* and *Julius Ceasar* relied on stereotypes and signals of cultural diversity without delving into authentic representations of cultural heritage and history. In *The Orphan of Zhao*, a classic 13th-century Chinese play, the Casting Director, Helena Palmer, cast few

non-white actors. In Gregory's directorial work, in Thomson's view, his production "did not have a connection to the setting of the play through their [the cast's] ethnicity or cultural heritage," which "raises questions and issues concerning cultural imperialism" (482). In a different way, in Thomson's view, Doran failed to authentically bring cultural diversity to life in the RSC's all-Black production of *Julius Caesar*. Thomas refers to British director Peter Brook's question: "why assemble an 'ethnically diverse' group of actors, if the expressive possibilities of their cultural knowledge are negated in the production?" (483). In these ways, Thomson seems to conclude that Doran's directorial work and Helena Palmer's casting decisions were motivated by tokenism and surface-level representations of cultural diversity, while Iqbal Khan's directorial work demonstrated sincere commitment to honoring cultural traditions in his production.

Similar to Iqbal Khan's work directing *Much Ado about Nothing*, Khan's involvement with *Othello* displayed dedication to resisting racial stereotypes by listening to actors' ideas and perspectives. During rehearsals for *Othello*, Khan asked questions to Hugh Quarshie and Lucian Msamati, seeking their input on character development, staging, and backstories. Cast members described Khan's directing style as collaborative and imaginative and noted that he sought to create art with messages that resonate with modern audiences. During rehearsals of *Othello*, Quarshie shared with Khan his ideas to create an Othello with a rich backstory and complex psychology, elements lacking in many productions of the play. Additionally, Quarshie and Msamati collaborated on acting decisions that would play off one another in unique ways, motivated in part to resist racial stereotypes. In these ways, Khan and the cast reimaged *Othello* to be a play that challenges racial stereotypes—a difficult feat given the play's problematic history.

Critical Reception

Audience members and theater critics, for the most part, loved the production. In the UK newspaper *The Guardian*, Michael Billington reviewed the performance with glowingly positive descriptors: a “gripping production,” “fascinating,” “imaginative,” “a totally fresh perspective” (“Othello Review”). Importantly, not only were audience members and critics intrigued and compelled by Iqbal Khan’s non-traditional casting choices, but they were also impressed by the acting, set design, lighting, music, and costumes. In these ways, Khan was able to pull off the feat of offering a fresh perspective by casting a Black actor as Iago, while avoiding the pitfall of relying on non-traditional casting to carry the play.

In a review published in *Media Diversified*, Sabo Kpade describes the impacts of casting Msamati in the role of Iago. Initially, Kpade asks, “How on earth can Iago be Black?... A Black Iago, on first thought, will only neutralise that racial conflict, making for an emotional flatline” (“Othello”). Certainly, one might assume that casting a non-white actor as Iago would remove racial motives for Iago sabotaging Othello. However, he concludes that “a Black Iago heightened the tension between the two, giving Iago bigger cause for grief having being overlooked for a promotion by the only Black general to whom he had been loyal” (“Othello”). Kpade’s interpretation offers a compelling argument for racial animosity felt by Iago toward Othello. Through this interpretative lens, Iago would have believed he and Othello shared racial solidarity, and when that presumed solidarity was broken, Iago to felt rebuffed and hurt. Kpade writes further on the topic of racial dynamics in the production, and as he does so, he alludes to the critics who disliked the casting decision:

A Black Iago is a game-changer, especially one at the RSC. It adds a fresh lick of paint on the role and it enlivens conversations around it. It does not alter his motivations in a radical way, for this would call for alterations in the script, which is bound to raise even more hell. It is odd that detractors decry the casting of Msamati... This seems to me less a case of colour-blind casting than it is colour-enhancing. (“Othello”)

As Kpade mentions, some theater critics reviewed Khan’s *Othello* with disapproval for casting a Black actor as Iago. An example that illustrates his point is a review by Stephen Collins in an online British media outlet. Collins laments that we are in “an era where colour-blind and gender-blind casting is considered best practice” (“Review: *Othello*”). He argues that meritocracy, rather than race, should be the only factor for directors in hiring actors. While he praises white actors in the production (“the scenes with James Corrigan’s quisling Roderigo are quite fine” and “the best work comes from Jacob Fortune-Lloyd’s classical” acting), he harshly critiques the two leading Black actors (“Review”). In his view, Quarshie’s *Othello* is “the dullest interpretation of *Othello* I have ever seen” and Msamati’s Iago is “a raving lunatic” who “seems mentally unhinged, in an axe-murderer kind of way” (“Review”). It is significant to note that Collins believes Quarshie’s “dull” performance of *Othello* would have been improved by more evident “passion” to demonstrate to the audience his character can “sustain and fuel the jealous rage which takes a life” (“Review”). Rather than the calm dignity which Quarshie’s *Othello* employs to command the Venetian Senate’s attention, Collins argues that “in order for the play to succeed, the audience needs to see what Desdemona sees, what the Duke sees, what Iago is jealous of, and what Cassio respects” (“Review”). In other words, the actor playing *Othello* should give an exaggerated performance for the white characters around him—and largely white audience—in ways that conform to historical white perceptions of Black stereotypes, perceptions fraught with larger-than-

life “passion” and “rage” (“Review”). Collins concludes that “with this casting,” and with not enough “tempestuous feelings” played up for the audience, the production fails to reproduce the greatness of “traditional” performances of *Othello* (“Review”).

Collins returns to his argument that casting should be based on meritocracy, regardless of race, and implies that the diverse casting in Khan’s *Othello* lacked the quality acting Collins prefers from traditional (majority-white) productions: “Appearance is not the key to Othello. Great acting is” (“Review”). I would argue that for Collins and other white critics like him, casting a Black actor in a historically white role threatens the balance of power in the theater industry. Collins’s desperate rhetorical questions, asking why white actors cannot play historically-Black roles, expose his concern that white actors’ control may be slipping away. However, the grips of white supremacy continue to loosen with productions like Khan’s, allowing for more inclusion, representation, and justice.

Kpade, as a Black British person who writes on topics of diversity in the arts, has his finger on the pulse of white supremacist attitudes within the sphere of theater and the arts. Thus, when Kpade shuts down negative reviews by white critics and praises the performance as “colour-enhancing,” his opinion carries weight. In this way, he reveals that negative critical reception had less to do with quality of acting or Khan’s directorial work, and more to do with entrenched racist ideologies of those critics.

Othello and the “White Scapegoat”

In his article “Iago as the Racist-Function in *Othello*,” Eric Brinkman argues this same idea: that productions of *Othello*, even with integrated casting, ultimately fail to be antiracist and instead appease white liberal audiences. Brinkman calls Iago a “white

scapegoat” who serves a function of allowing white audience members to ease cognitive discordance of the play’s racism and their own complicity in the white supremacist society in which they live. Brinkman contends that Iago’s blatantly racist language and racially-motivated acts to destroy Othello allow white audience members to point to an individual as the racist villain of the play, while ignoring systemic racism within the play, and thus, the racist society they navigate and participate in. Brinkman highlights the anti-Black language of the play. Examples of racist speech in the play include Roderigo and Iago’s references to Othello as “the thick lips” and “a black ram,” while suggesting that Othello stole Desdemona and is “making the beast with two backs,” thus sexualizing Othello in an animalistic way (Shakespeare, *Othello* 201-204). Additionally, Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio don’t bother to call Othello by his name, but rather opt for “the Moor.” Yet, Brinkman suggests that even with offensive speech removed, *Othello* would remain problematic due to a system of oppression designed to prevent non-white individuals from succeeding without white approval. Repeatedly throughout the play, Othello must prove himself to white people, defending his humanity and right to be respected. Because of this, Brinkman argues, the true culprit of Othello’s downfall is Venetian society, which dehumanizes non-white community members unless they act in accordance with the norms of white society.

Brinkman analyzes the 2015 RSC production of *Othello*, evaluating its effectiveness at challenging racist notions that have historically been perpetuated by the play. Considering Khan’s choice to cast Lucian Msamati, a Black British actor, as Iago, Brinkman believes that the production manages to spread out the overtly racist attitudes from solely Iago to Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio. However, Brinkman concludes that

the production does not work and is ultimately problematic. I agree with Brinkman's observation that "Khan attempts to subvert Iago's racist language by putting it in the mouth of a Black actor" (35). Simply casting a Black actor as Iago does not negate the anti-Black ideas in the play. Brinkman's central argument gets to the heart of the matter:

Large institutional theaters are white spaces designed to avoid the circumstances that provoke this anxiety, and in this context of targeting the needs of white consumers, productions of *Othello* enact a dramaturgy that systematically continues to elevate the cognitive needs of white people over people of color. Contemporary changes in casting practices merely obfuscate this practice, as the Black male actors playing Othello are forced into an existential crisis. (23)

In other words, "non-traditional" or "colorblind" casting are, at best, band-aids incapable of healing deep wounds of racism within the theater industry. At worst, these practices are feel-good ways for white audiences to engage in a "diverse" theater experience without actually challenging their complicity in systemic racism.

Performing Othello While Black

Actor Adrian Lester played the role of Othello in 2013 at the National Theater in London. Directed by Nicholas Hytner, the production was an attempt to make the play "less racist" by updating the setting to a military backdrop ("we were in camouflage gear with backpacks and automatic weapons" (Lester 225) and casting more actors of color in the cast. Lester had asked Hytner about the idea of casting more actors of color in the play. Lester had wanted Othello "to be seen as an individual with unique past experiences and intellect" rather than the only Black character who would be perceived by white audiences as "a racial example," while Iago, because of other white actors on stage, would be perceived as an individual (226). Lester astutely observes that isolating Othello as the sole Black character while making Iago a white character among other white

characters creates a risk of “making Iago’s bitterness and scheming a character trait, while making Othello’s gullibility and murderous anger a racial trait” (226). Lester makes clear that he doesn’t “particularly like the play” because when he watches it performed, he finds it “deeply upsetting and I come away angry” (224). His anger stems from “Iago’s seeming and easy manipulation” of others in the play, “a manipulation in which the audience is made to feel complicit” (224). What is further infuriating to him is when he has heard “audiences who have gently laughed at Iago’s ability” to manipulate characters. (224). However, Lester notes that *Othello* is one of Shakespeare’s “most controversial and brilliant pieces of work” because it is so difficult to analyze and because it highlights issues about race that have plagued our society for over four centuries (225). In the end, Lester seems satisfied that Hytner’s production sufficiently challenged traditional productions of *Othello* due to the production’s updates in setting and casting.

I think when Lester performed as Othello in 2013, the production was innovative and progressive due to its added complexity to the setting and its inclusion of Black actors in the cast. However, as the political landscape has changed with the rise of antiracist movements like Black Lives Matter (2013), Say Her Name (2014), and We See You White American Theater (2020), people concerned with representations of people of color in theater can expect more from productions. With murders of Trayvon Martin (2013), George Floyd (2020), and Breonna Taylor (2020), mainstream American media became saturated with stories and images of Black individuals being murdered by white police officers, waking up white Americans to the systemic racism of which they are a part.

In the RSC production of *Othello*, Hugh Quarshie performs the speech to the Venetian Senate with undertones of aggressive injustice against Brabantio. He is dignified, eloquent, and he garners the Senate's respect. Msamati's performance, as Brinkman notes, is certainly "brilliant," with the psychological depth and character development that he infuses into the character (226). Msamati inspires laughs from audience members with his deadpan delivery of lines. Rather than performing the part with exaggerated charm, he instead opts for an understated comedy, commanding the stage with a presence that exudes confidence, control, and a sense of social capital akin to the effortlessness of being "cool." It is as if he is holding back, and he inspires curiosity from the audience.

Although casting a Black actor in the role of Iago does not extract the anti-Black attitudes sewn into the fabric of *Othello*, Msamati and Quarshie work exceptionally well together as actors to challenge the idea that Othello is gullible and trusting *because of his race*. Instead, Iago's "motiveless malignity," as Samuel Taylor Coolidge famously wrote, becomes a mysteriously evil motor propelling Iago to destroy Othello for a number of reasons. Eric Brinkman argues that both representations of Blackness on stage are negative: Iago is manipulative and evil, while Othello is gullible and violent. However, the actors interact on stage in ways that do not allow those aspects of their characters to define them. Instead, Msamati and Quarshie perform complex, multifaceted characters that resist stereotypes. Both characters generate sympathy and rapport with the audience. The problematic aspect arises when white audience members exit the theater without an understanding of the systemic racism within the play—and within broader society—in which they are complicit.

I agree with Angela Pao, who pointed out that issues of race in a theater production do not arise when an actor of color is placed with a white actor or another actor of color. The presence *and* absence of Black actors on stage—along with the racial messages communicated through the script and the cultural point of views of the playwright and director—communicate messages to the audience. A dangerous aspect of white supremacy is the insidious way that the group in power views themselves as non-raced. This harmful perspective seeps into cultural norms, identifying white people as “standard” and people of color as deviations from that standard.

A key element of RSC’s production in resisting racial stereotypes is the performance of Emilia, performed by Ayesha Dharker. As an actress of color, appearing to an audience as if she is of Indian ethnicity, Dharker is the third pillar of three actors of color in the production. While Othello could be criticized as gullible and Iago as evil, Dharker emerges as a character of remarkable integrity, bravery, and intelligence. During the final scene, when Othello kills Desdemona and himself, Emilia realizes with horror what her husband, Iago, has done in tricking Othello to believe Desdemona was unfaithful to him. As one reviewer put it, Dharker’s performance is “a kaleidoscope of emotion resolving in a blaze of courage” (Brennan). Filled with overwhelming sadness, anger, and regret that she unknowingly played a role in Iago’s scheme, Emilia ends her own life after her moving and powerful speech.

What the actors of color playing the roles of Othello, Iago, and Emilia help achieve is a more varied set of representations of Black and Brown characters than what the play has historically offered. Although the production fails to remove racist ideologies from Shakespeare’s script, the production succeeds in humanizing Othello.

Within a context of a multiracial cast, *Othello* is no longer a representation of all Black people. Rather, he is an individual caught in the snare of a twisted sociopath. A reviewer concluded about Lucian Msamati's performance of Iago that Iago is "trapped in his own snares" (Brennan). The reviewer describes the very end of the show, encapsulating Iago's remarkable and mad destruction of Othello, Desdemona, Emilia, and himself: "The final image is of him kneeling amid the desolation, head thrown back in laughter. This is Iago's show" (Brennan). Msamati's Iago, like Quarshie's Othello, is an individual rather than a stereotype. Despite the inherent racism of the play—and some problematic aspects of Msamati's engagement with performing racial insults—it is the individualization of Blackness that helps break down barriers of racial stereotypes that the play has perpetuated throughout history.

Limitations of Brinkman's Argument

Returning to Brinkman's argument that the RSC production of *Othello* fails to push against anti-Black stereotypes, I would like to consider the lived experience of the Black male actor who played the role of Othello. Prior to playing the role of Othello, Hugh Quarshie wrote a well-known essay expressing that he would never play the role due to the characterization of Othello expressed through his gullible behavior. At the time Quarshie wrote the essay, he would agree with Brinkman's analysis of the psychological harms of acting the role of Othello:

Performing what is theoretically 'the role of a lifetime,' *Othello* has been shaped textually and performatively to disregard the interests of the Black male actor playing Othello in order to fit the cognitive, psychological, and cultural needs of the predominantly white liberal audiences that attend the productions at these theatrical institutions. (23)

This observation, that the acting experience of the actor playing Othello causes mental discord for the benefit of white audiences, certainly describes the experiences of many Black actors playing Othello. I agree with Brinkman's insight that the play is intended to serve white audiences, and in many ways, the role of Othello disregards the needs of the Black male actor. At the same time, though, it would be unwise to conclude that every Black male actor feels this way. Even though the RSC production problematically serves most white liberal audiences, Quarshie, in post-production panels and interviews, said that he was proud of the way he and the cast performed the play. Quarshie strove to use the acting opportunity as a springboard to open hearts and minds to the possibility that Othello is more complex and human than previous productions may have conveyed. Even though *Othello* is deeply problematic, should theater companies refrain from performing the show? In many cases, maybe. However, as art is always evolving and iterating as our human society changes, I think there are benefits to leaving open the door to possibilities of productions with new and creative visions.

In both *American Moor* and the RSC production of *Othello*, Iago is a throughline. In my next chapter, I discuss how the Actor in *American Moor* assumes the roles of both Othello and Iago. In this way, because the Actor is Black, Othello and Iago are Black, too. The Actor infuses Iago's cleverness, confidence, and influence into his interactions with the audience and the Director, and by extension with the imagined Venetian Senate and Brabantio. By taking on Iago's qualities, the Actor moves through the world of the play with Iago's power, but, importantly, without Iago's malice and racist beliefs. In this way, even though the Actor assumes the roles of Othello and Iago, he modifies Iago's character so deeply that Iago is like an invisible cloak with the faintest outline, shrouding

the Actor with his strengths but vanishing visually from the stage. Cobb's rewriting of the story takes place in a time when Iago has exited the stage and passed on, leaving elements of himself that future generations can adopt or reject. As white audience members experience Cobb's play, they do not have a "white scapegoat" on which audiences have for centuries been able to place blame. Or, do they? With the evolution of Iago into the Actor, can white audiences no longer relinquish their responsibility and complicity in the racist structures that have hindered Black people throughout history?

Not quite. Although Cobb has excised Iago physically from the stage, Cobb transfers Iago's role as a "white scapegoat" to the Director and various acting teachers who have barred the Actor from participating in "white roles" of Shakespeare's plays. By creating these stereotypical white characters, Cobb allows white liberal audiences to breathe a sigh of relief: they aren't like *those* white people, who are clearly racist. With the inclusion of these "white scapegoats," *American Moor* gives an opportunity for white audiences to perceive the problem of racism as something confined to racist individuals who are the bad eggs in society. But the white scapegoats in *American Moor* serve as important examples for white audiences to witness how *not* to treat Black people. These stereotypical white characters also build empathy in the audience towards the Actor, as they come to understand the repeated instances in which he has been treated unfairly throughout his life. While Iago in *Othello* ensnares the audience in his trap of evil influence, the legacy of Iago in *American Moor* is wielded for good, and examples of racism no longer have the same hold on the audience that Iago possessed in *Othello*.

Legacy of Whiteness

In the RSC production, Iago still carries the legacy of whiteness. The character still says racist remarks. The difference may have shifted from white-on-Black racism to Black-on-Black racism/colorism, but Iago is a darker-skinned African British man who is seeking revenge on a lighter-skinned African British man. This vengeance could be interpreted as hatred towards his own race and ethnic background and envy that Othello has lighter skin and also is ingratiated better into white society.

Iqbal Khan's production of *Othello* adjusts the function of Iago as a white scapegoat for anti-Black behavior and words. However, Msamati as Iago is like a traffic controller for what is allowed and not allowed for white people to engage in regarding racist remarks. The introductory scene between Iago and Roderigo demonstrates how Msamati's Iago polices Roderigo's racist descriptions of Othello. Roderigo's term for Othello, "the thick lips," is met by a seemingly offended Iago. However, after a painfully long silence for white Roderigo, Iago relieves Roderigo's discomfort by making a funny sound with his lips, a reference to Roderigo's racist comment of "the thick lips," allowing Roderigo to laugh in relief, and thus granting Roderigo permission to make fun of Othello for his physical characteristics. In this way, Iago invites white audience members to laugh with him and Roderigo as they make fun of Othello in a racist way. This interaction ensnares white audience members into participating in racist attitudes, even without them realizing it. After Msamati blows his lips and laughs with Roderigo, he then pushes Roderigo out of the boat they are sitting in with a disapproving expression and movement. The interaction is confusing because Iago both invites racist perspectives and then appears as if he is disapproving of them. But the tone of the interaction is humorous

and light-hearted, rather than a true moment of criticizing Roderigo's racist comments. Thus, Msamati playing Iago adds a restrictive barrier around the racist insults Roderigo says about Othello to Brabantio, but with Msamati engaging in the racism, Msamati's role as a Black Iago fails to challenge the inherent racism in Act I, Scene I, and indeed throughout the rest of the play. Without modifying the play itself, any production of *Othello* will continue to perpetuate anti-Black stereotypes.

Close Reading of Khan's *Othello* Production

By making Iago into a Black character, Khan introduces multiple directionalities of racism, more nuanced than black and white, reflecting the complex racial issues of the modern day. Virginia Vaughn states that *Othello* relies on the hero's Blackness as "the visual signifier of his Otherness" (*Contextual History*). What happens when Othello is not the only Black character, and when there are different ethnicities within the umbrella category of "Black"? There become numerous individual ethnic experiences branded by Otherness, notably by people of color (Iago, Othello, Montano, and Emilia), within a predominantly white culture. The casting decision makes Iago the true outsider of the play, complicating traditional critical discourse about the black/white dynamic between Othello and Iago. In my thesis, I argue that there are four directions of racism relating to Iago: (1) internalized racism against himself; (2) Iago's racism toward Othello; (3) Iago's racial hatred toward white supremacy; and (4) Othello's racism toward Iago. All of these racial dynamics occurred because of Khan's and the casting director's decision to cast Lucian Msamati as Iago.

In the RSC production, Iago has deeply-hued skin, darker than that of the actor who plays Othello, and he has a distinctive Zimbabwean accent. In performances of

Othello in which Iago is white, Iago is the ultimate insider. However, the opposite is true in Khan's performance. Internalized racism has come to define who Iago is. He has internalized racial oppression to such a degree that his language, imprinted with racial associations between blackness and sin, implicates himself as a devilish person, not just by his character, but by his skin color. When he makes derogatory racial comments about Othello, he is simultaneously attacking himself and his own race. In this production, the concept purported by Samuel Taylor Coleridge that Iago possesses "motiveless malignity" can be disputed on racial grounds—Iago's life as a racial outsider has made him feel so rejected that he projects his pain onto Othello and others around him.

Unlike traditional *Othello* productions, in which one might posit that Iago despises Othello because of Othello's darker skin color, in Khan's production, Iago resents Othello because of his *lighter* skin color. The situation is an example of colorism, in which light skin tones are preferred over darker skin tones within the same race—an extension of white supremacy. Unlike Iago, Othello can more easily blend into white society and, in this way, gain more societal capital. Iago is envious of Othello that his lighter appearance may have helped him achieve a higher rank. At the same time, he is disgusted that Othello has subdued his African heritage to such an extent that one might think he is "passing" into white society. One reviewer concluded that Msamati's Iago is "full of thwarted racial pride: he, more than Othello, is the play's outsider who resents both assumed white superiority and Othello's integrationist tactics." Msamati's inflection on the line "*I hate the Moor*," dripping with loathing, either establishes an understood difference between Othello as a "Moor" and Iago as a different ethnicity, or emphasizes that Othello is undeniably black, no matter how well he has blended into white society.

In addition to resenting Othello for his lighter skin tone, Iago despises the white supremacist culture in which he lives, adapting to it by engaging in racist talk yet policing others' racial sentiments, notably with the white character Roderigo. In the opening scene, when Roderigo calls Othello "the thick-lips" (201), Iago looks at him and freezes. For a moment, Roderigo is not sure if he has crossed a line with Iago by making fun of another black person. However, after a few tense seconds, Iago breaks out in laughter and starts blowing air through his lips, and Roderigo follows suit, clearly relieved. The exchange establishes Iago as in control of the permission for Roderigo's racist talk. However, by participating in racist conversation, he is, unfortunately, perpetuating negative racial stereotypes of his own race. When Iago calls out to Brabantio that "an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (203), Roderigo stifles back laughter, not fully comfortable in expressing his racism to Iago, yet boyishly giddy to make fun of Othello for being black. The same dynamic occurs when Iago describes Othello in animalistic terms, causing Roderigo to sputter with laughter when Iago refers to Othello as a "Barbary horse" and warning Brabantio that he will have his "nephews neigh" to him and will have "coursers for cousins and jennets for germans" (204). Iago's racially coded insults pump up Roderigo to confidently call out to Brabantio that his daughter is in "the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor" (205), and as a result, Iago yells out, "Boom!", an added exclamation which further gives permission to Roderigo to indulge in racist speech. However, when Roderigo tries to get into the gondola in which he and Iago had traveled, Iago refuses to let him in: "No, no, no, no, no. Farewell" (206) (the "no's" are added to the play). The moment again displays Iago's power over Roderigo—power to allow Roderigo in the space of racist speech, and power to kick him out when Iago is

done. In an interview, Khan said that Msamati's Iago "manipulates others' anxieties" about race and "liberates the vocabulary" of racism in Roderigo by giving him permission to "give voice to a certain ugly instinct" ("How Did I Get Here?").

Although the direction of racism from Othello to Iago is not overt in the performance, it manifests itself through Othello's choice of Cassio instead of Iago as his lieutenant and in a subtle textual change in the interrogation scene. When Iago is black and Cassio is white, the choice of Cassio as Othello's lieutenant becomes inflected with racial preference. Othello has ingratiated himself into white society to such an extent that he either implicitly or explicitly prefers Cassio over Iago, even though Cassio has less military experience (Iago complains of Cassio's inexperience, "Mere prattle without practice / Is all his soldiership" (197)). Iago, although a trusted person in Othello's life, whom Othello repeatedly describes as "honest," is beneath him hierarchically. Additionally, a minor textual change in the performance reveals Othello's perception of and feelings towards Iago's dark skin. In a line in which Othello describes how Desdemona's name has been tainted in his eyes, Khan changed "mine" to "thine," shifting Othello's racial hatred from himself to Iago: "Her name that was as fresh / as Diane's visage is now begrimed and black / as thine own face" (306). This is the only instance that Othello mentions anything about Iago's race, and it is yelled with rage as Othello is torturing Iago. It seems as though his deep-seated colorism emerges when he is the most emotionally upset.

Through modifications in Othello's behavior—including adding a violent interrogation scene between Othello and Iago—Khan distances Othello from a racial

stereotype which has historically come to define his actions. In an interview about the performance, Hugh Quarshie explained,

In our production, we have attempted quite fastidiously to avoid any conclusion that Othello behaves as he does because of his ethnicity. Not simply because of the casting of a black Iago, but also because Iago is subjected to a fairly harsh interrogation, and at every point, it's made very hard for Iago to persuade Othello to put his plot into effect... So we went to some lengths to try to pull the play back from suggesting that Othello is gullible because of his ethnicity. We tried to make it much harder for Iago to persuade him, and thus to make Othello less of a fool and the play less racist. ("Is Othello a Racist Play?")

The artistic choices of making it harder for Othello to believe Iago successfully separates Othello from the extreme racial stereotypes of gullibility, excitability, and savagery attributed to Africans by white people.

In the famous temptation scene, the blocking of Iago and Othello underscores Othello's resistance to believing Iago's suggestion that Desdemona has been unfaithful. Iago moves around the stage holding a radio signal, stopping at points and lifting the signal in the air to test for radio waves, while Othello sits at an adjoining computer, shaking his head to Iago or indicating for him to pause. The action is symbolic: like Iago testing out different spots to reach radio waves, he is also trying different tactics of suggestion to reach Othello. Reflected in his physical movement, Iago is exerting a lot of energy to persuade Othello while Othello sits back, resistant to believing what Iago is implying.

After the temptation scene, which demonstrates Othello's sensibility and rationality, Khan has fashioned an interrogation scene, which reveals how seriously Othello is taking Iago's suggestion and demonstrates that Othello is not going to believe Iago's claim without evidence. Othello uses violence against Iago in his demand to have

“ocular proof” (304). In the text, Othello’s stage direction is “He seizes Iago by the throat,” but Khan’s performance takes a different approach (304). Instead of a sudden eruption of anger, the scene is, at the outset, a premeditated, military-style torture scene. Othello uses tools instead of his own hands, further distancing himself from violent savagery associated with the stereotype. Othello uses a hammer and cuts Iago’s ear, causing blood to spurt out; he holds a plastic bag over Iago’s head as Iago struggles to breathe; and he poises the hammer behind Iago’s head, ready to hurt him if Iago does not reply satisfactorily. In this way, violence is not attributed to race, but rather to Othello’s role as a military commander. Additionally, Khan removed Othello’s line “I’ll tear her all to pieces” (309), softening Othello’s feelings of violence toward Desdemona, and further disassociating him from the stereotype of the gullible, violent Moor.

Khan incorporates modern-day attitudes of racial prejudice through the addition of a rap battle between a black Montano and a white Cassio, steeped in racial tension, anchoring the play in today’s multiethnic society and serving as a protest against racial discrimination of black people. In scene 2.3, when the group of soldiers celebrates Othello winning a battle against the Turkish fleet, Khan added a rap battle that exposes Cassio’s racist sentiments and brings up twenty-first century issues of race. When Cassio is drunk to the point of publicly making out with his prostitute girlfriend, Bianca, Montano picks up a microphone and jokingly, yet biting, insults Cassio, starting a back-and-forth:

MONTANO: Yo, I got a song. I feel sorry for Cassio. Deep down he’s really sad, ‘cause his mother is promiscuous, so we all could be his dad. Is it you, sir? Are you – are you my real dad?

CASSIO: This man became a soldier, a tough choice, I’m sure, because it’s rare to see a black man on the right side of the law.

MONTANO: Now – hold on. This guy’s a lieutenant, so we [gestures to another black soldier] had better run, because we all know what happens when you give white people a gun.

[Cassio takes the microphone, stutters, and Montano takes it back]

MONTANO: This guy’s a bro until he was a superstar before, but now he’s in the Cyprus war taking orders from a Moor. How does it feel, boy? How does it feel? How does it feel?

Although Montano’s first line jabs at Cassio’s mother, Cassio responds with a comment about race. Cassio refers to a pernicious modern-day stereotype that Black people are criminals. Hearing the stereotype come from Cassio, whose whiteness is even more apparent within the Black medium of a rap, makes the stereotype seem particularly bigoted and backwards. Whereas Montano’s insult was met with laughter, the group seems taken aback at Cassio’s racist insult. Montano’s reply to Cassio—that white people, if given a gun, will shoot innocent Black people—echoes the tragic issue of white police officers shooting unarmed Black people. Montano gives a knowing look to another Black soldier in the group. The group gives a loud response, apparently on Montano’s side but surprised that he stood up to Cassio’s racism. Although Cassio takes the microphone, he becomes flustered, and Montano takes it back. Montano ends the battle with strength: despite Cassio’s racist feelings, Cassio is subservient to Othello, so according to Cassio’s own logic, he is debasing himself to a Black man. Montano’s point suggests that Cassio is not as great as he thinks he is, and also that Black men are in honorable positions of power, showing that Cassio’s stereotype is misguided. Cassio lunges at Montano, but a soldier pushes Cassio away. The rap battle is part of an overarching theme throughout the play that focuses on individual racial experience. The entire exchange has Black aesthetics—Montano is the darkest character on stage, and everyone on stage is engaged in the battle. Cassio is clearly not as good as Montano. In

these ways, the rap battle gives voice to Montano, and by extension, to the Black experience he expresses.

The RSC production of *Othello* brings together creative modifications to Shakespeare's text which illuminate the experience of the ethnic outsider. No longer is Othello the only outsider of the play, and no longer is he conceived of as fitting the mold of a racial stereotype. While there is no universal experience of ethnicity, every person lives with an experience of ethnicity. Khan's production reshapes *Othello* to offer each person in the audience more opportunities of identification with the characters, and in the process, allows the audience to come away with questions about the experience of the ethnic outsider, in Shakespeare's time and our own.

Chapter IV.

Keith Hamilton Cobb's *American Moor*

Many Black American theater artists have responded to a racist theater industry, not by rejecting Shakespeare, but instead “with hyper-engagement” (Cahill and Hall 4). One example of this is the 2015 retelling of *Othello* at the Red Bull Theater in New York City. Written and performed by Keith Hamilton Cobb, *American Moor* is a one-man-show based on Cobb’s experience as an actor auditioning for the role of Othello. Scholar Ambereen Dadabhoy argues that *American Moor* pushes against a racialized and stereotyped portrayal of *Othello* (Dadabhoy 83). Cobb achieves this by reversing the structure of the play. In Shakespeare’s *Othello*, the villain, Iago, performs many soliloquys, confiding in the audience with his plans to ruin Othello while deftly persuading them in the process. However, Othello does not directly speak to the audience. In *American Moor*, the Othello character, named “The Actor,” is given all of the soliloquys, granting the audience insight into his psychology and character. The Iago character, a white theater director, is portrayed as one-dimensional and easy to interpret. The structural change helps to make the Actor a three-dimensional character that has the privilege of connecting with the audience, while the director lacks any closeness or empathy from the audience.

In relation to *American Moor*, it is significant that Dadabhoy distinguishes between the act of performing Shakespeare and the act of reading Shakespeare. For Black actors embodying the role of Othello, the acting process involves stripping their identity and donning a racialized version of themselves, while subjecting themselves to the racist gaze of white audience members. In contrast, reading is a solitary, intimate act, in which the

reader remains themselves and has the power to imagine the visual life of the play.

Dadabhoy views *American Moor* as a solution to the perpetual reproduction of white modes of thought within *Othello*. She argues, “by claiming the authorial function and authoritative voice” of *Othello*, Cobb “challenges and divests himself” of a racialized perception of the Black experience perceived from a white gaze (88). Dadabhoy stresses the importance of dialogue between Shakespeare, directors, and Black actors in order to more truthfully represent Black characters on the stage.

Dramatic Structure and Performing Race

Since the play’s original productions in the early 1600s, *Othello* has been perceived by many as “Iago’s play.” *Othello* is the only Shakespeare play in which the villain possesses as many lines as the hero, a literary curiosity that critics have wrestled with for centuries. Yet it is not simply Iago’s stage time that makes him the central, driving force in *Othello*. The structural design of the play gives Iago a platform of control over the narrative and a privileged connection with the audience that *Othello* does not have. The aspect of the dramatic structure that elevates Iago’s influence over the play is Shakespeare’s strategic use of the theatrical device of soliloquy. Iago’s soliloquies are weapons of influence over the audience, inviting the audience to be witnesses of, and, as many Shakespeare scholars have argued, participants in, Iago’s insidious plans to exact revenge upon *Othello*. Iago’s soliloquies occur strategically at the beginning and end of acts, offering the villain’s perspective on the action that has just occurred or his intentions to manipulate characters and events in the action to come. The placement of soliloquies within the dramatic structure reinforces Iago as the mastermind behind the dramatic narrative of *Othello* and behind the unfolding downfall of *Othello*.

Iago and the Soliloquy

Actor Rory Kinnear played the role of Iago in a six-month run of *Othello*, directed by Nicholas Hytner, performed in 2013 at the National Theater in London. From his experience performing the part of Iago, Kinnear reflected on why audiences are compelled by Iago, attributing the fascination to the structural influence of his character:

Iago doesn't have poetry or qualities of openness. Iago is in many ways a wonderful part structurally in terms of the way that you, as the bad guy, illicit understanding, sympathy, and entertainment from the audience, their camaraderie. When you see a young girl being, over several seconds, painfully murdered, you as an audience member are responsible. The playwright's structural ingenuity with it is why people love playing the part and why the audience finds him compelling. (Lester 230)

Iago's soliloquies create a tangible connection between the audience and him that solicits their attention and engagement. Even though the malicious thoughts Iago shares in his soliloquies inspire repulsion from many audience members, the audience is captivated by his solo performances. In 1809, August Wilhelm Schlegel wrote about Iago's close connection with the audience, formed from his ability to capture the audience's attention. In his essay "Criticisms on Shakespeare's Tragedies," Schlegel writes:

A more artful villain than this Iago was never portrayed; he spreads his nets with a skill which nothing can escape. The repugnance inspired by his aims becomes tolerable from the attention of the spectators being directed to his means: these furnish endless employment to the understanding. (qtd. in Bloom 99)

The issue of race arises when the audience's engagement with and tolerance for Iago connects to Iago's hateful attitudes toward Othello's race. As audience members get caught in Iago's persuasive influence, their tolerance for Iago's evil thoughts comes to include the racist attitudes he harbors. As Iago's soliloquies—sprinkled with humor, clever rhetoric, and performative charm—elicit laughter from audience members, the

boundary between audience disapproval and tolerance of Iago becomes muddled and unclear. In the introduction to *American Moor*, Kim Hall captures the racially-influenced relationship Iago's character can form with audiences: "Often, then, Othello becomes Iago's play and in many current productions, it's hard to tell whether audiences eventually feel complicit in Iago's laughter or are untouched, sharing his position of white omniscience" ("Introduction" n.p.). The dramatic device of the soliloquy in *Othello* provides a platform on which Iago can wield his words into power.

Othello and the Monologue

If Iago is the evil genius of the soliloquy, Othello is the noble master of the monologue. Although Othello claims he is not well-spoken ("Rude am I in my speech" [Shakespeare 220]), he demonstrates a high level of poetic eloquence, rich in emotional expression, that is in full display in his monologues. If Iago's power is derived from his manipulative hints and suggestions, Othello's strength lies in his poetic storytelling. Two of Othello's monologues have captured audiences with their eloquence and emotion: Othello's speech to the Venetian Senate in Act I, Scene 3, and his final speech to the Senators before he kills himself in Act 5, Scene 2. Some critics have conveyed the great extent that they sympathized with Othello and the power of Othello's monologues. In 1817, William Hazlitt specifically attributed his sympathy for Othello to his two monologues to the Senate, at the start and end of the play. Hazlitt expresses his strong sympathy for Othello, owing to Othello's two powerful monologues:

His farewell speech, before he kills himself, in which he conveys his reasons to the senate for the murder of his wife, is equal to the first speech in which he gave them an account of his courtship of her, and 'his whole course of love.'... If anything could add to the force of our sympathy with

Othello, or compassion for his fate, it would be the frankness and generosity of his nature, which so little deserve it. (106)

As Hazlitt's emotional response demonstrates, *Othello* garners audiences' sympathy for Othello through Othello's speeches to other characters within the play. Unlike Iago's bids for the audience's sympathy through roping them in as insiders to his secret plots of revenge, Othello's monologues do not seem to employ a manipulative form of persuasion, and they are not indirect appeals to the audience as are Iago's soliloquies. Rather, Othello seeks to persuade an audience within the play, the Venetian Senate. Throughout his persuasive speeches, his words ring with integrity and respect for his audience. Even to audience members who have wronged him, including Brabantio and Iago, Othello communicates his firm stance without lowering himself to others' pettiness and judgement. It appears clear, then, that Othello's qualities of "frankness and generosity" expressed through his monologues, as Hazlitt observed with admiration in 1817, directly conflict with Iago's artful, manipulative qualities that reek from his engaging and repugnant soliloquies.

However, if we look closer at the contrast between Othello's "frankness" and Iago's artfulness, we arrive at a more nuanced understanding of Othello's "honest" monologues, an understanding that animates the heart of *American Moor*. In contrast to Iago's two-faced characterization, in which Iago communicates one thing to characters on stage and then reveals, in truthful communications alone on stage, how his dishonesty makes up a broader plan of revenge, Othello's communications to those around him seem to reflect consistent openness and honesty. Nevertheless, as expressed in *American Moor*, we cannot take Othello's consistent honesty at face value. Rather, as the dramatic forms in *American Moor* demonstrate, when we view Othello's speeches with an understanding

of his racialized identity, we come to see the performativity and artfulness of his speeches.

Indeed, Shakespearean scholars have challenged the idea that Othello moves through the world of the play naive of artful persuasion. For example, in her book chapter “Can You Be White and Hear This?” in *White People in Shakespeare*, Kim Hall describes the pressurized situations in which Othello performs his speeches, due to his position of being a Black man in a white supremacist society. Hall observes the racial climate of Othello’s monologues: “Othello’s most remembered speeches are those where he faces white judgment” (219). Consequently, when in front of a group of people in a racial position of power, Othello’s speeches cannot fully be understood as honest representations of himself and his thoughts. Rather, through a lens of performance for the approval of white judgment, Othello’s monologues are carefully crafted with his white audience in mind, artful out of necessity. For, as The Actor in *American Moor* reflects on Othello’s speeches, he perceives that “this black man is performing in front of white people and we have very few clues about his inner life” (Cobb, *American Moor* 16). In this respect, Othello’s performativity as a racialized subject in a white supremacist society translates in his monologues as a protective barrier between himself and his audience. For this reason, and based on the scholarship addressing Othello’s position as a racialized subject speaking before a white audience, we can argue that Othello hides more than he reveals. Clearly, when considering Iago’s and Othello’s soliloquies and monologues, *Othello* offers an imbalanced means of characterization of Iago and Othello, furthering the power imbalance between the two characters. While Iago has influence and

connection with the audience, the audience must understand Othello through his performative expressions for a white audience within the play.

American Moor's Use of Soliloquy and Monologue

Seeking to give Othello the platform of authentic communication that he was denied in *Othello*, Cobb, in *American Moor*, has appropriated *Othello* in ways that reshape Shakespeare's use of the dramatic conventions of soliloquy and monologue; in doing so, Cobb removes Iago's influential platform of truthful communication and flips the balance of power from Iago to Othello. Indeed, scholarly conversation has explored ways in which Cobb uses the dramatic convention of the soliloquy, in particular, as a means of reversing the power imbalance from Iago to Othello. For example, Ambereen Dadabhoy notices how Cobb uses the dramatic structure of *Othello* to give voice to Othello and challenge the racialized power Iago possesses. She writes, "The power of Cobb's play as an appropriation, a challenge, and an homage to *Othello* lies in its manipulation of Shakespeare's structure" (85). In other words, Cobb molds *Othello's* dramatic structure as if it were a ball of clay, and reshapes it to form a new creation with a powerful message. Specifically, Dadabhoy describes how Cobb restructures theatrical conventions in *Othello* to take power away from Iago and give it to Othello. She argues:

In Cobb's restructuring, it is the black actor, our proxy Othello, who frames the action, speaking directly to the audience in soliloquies that allow us access into his psyche. *American Moor* discloses the interior dimension of the black actor/character/Othello that Shakespeare denies. (85)

Dadabhoy perceives Cobb's appropriation of Shakespeare's overarching structure, an appropriation in which Cobb takes away Iago's control over the narrative and gives the narrative control to Othello, through a means of transferring Iago's soliloquy

opportunities to Othello. In fact, in *American Moor*, the Actor possesses nearly all of the lines in the play, and the majority of his lines are directed to the audience in long-form speeches.

Though I agree with Dadabhoy that the Actor's soliloquies in *American Moor* reveal the character's inner life to the audience—a space that Shakespeare had blocked Othello from sharing—I offer a complicating addition to Dadabhoy's assertion. Adding to Dadabhoy's argument, I would point out that the Actor's speeches to the audience do not fall neatly into the category of soliloquy, but instead move in and out of truth-telling soliloquies and performative monologues. To be sure, the Actor opens up about his emotions, struggles, and innermost thoughts that he typically would not share with others. In these ways, the Actor assumes the influential position Iago enjoys in *Othello* through the dramatic form of the soliloquy.

However, I posit that the Actor in *American Moor* cannot fully embody the authentic, secret-sharing communication of the soliloquy. After all, the Actor, unlike Iago, does not belong to the racially dominant group in which he lives, and thus does not have the easy connection with the audience that Iago does. In fact, the Actor is keenly aware that his audience is made up of white audience members. Indeed, in the stage directions for *American Moor*, Cobb specifically notes how the actor playing the role of the Actor should challenge and engage the audience. Cobb offers clues that he is referring to an audience that is predominantly white. The stage directions indicate that audiences may feel uncomfortable with the Actor's stories of being discriminated against as a Black actor in a white-controlled American theater industry. Certainly, Black audience members would not feel uncomfortable hearing the Actor's stories. After all, Black

viewers of *American Moor* would more likely feel validation and connection in ways starkly different than would white viewers. Thus, Cobb has not only predicted that there will be white audience members in his show, but he has also envisioned them as his target audience, essential to the play. The stage directions in *American Moor* reflect how the actor taking on the role of the Actor should come back to the audience with sincere care and respect, and should treat his white audience members as fellow “travelers” on a metaphorical road towards understanding and justice:

A note regarding staging and stage directions: The audience should and will find itself playing many parts. It is not intended that this process leave them in comfort. But throughout, the actor must return to them often with love and an open heart. He must return to engage them as travelers on this road with him, because that is what, in deigning to sit and experience *this* play, they have agreed to be... most of them. The actor asks early on that they trust him, perhaps not with words but by confiding in them. (“stage directions,” n.p.)

The stage directions of *American Moor* suggest one of Cobb’s intentions for the show is to build a bridge between a racial divide of two worlds, between systemically oppressed Black Americans and systemically privileged white Americans. In the stage direction note, the level of gentleness, patience, and respect towards white audience members, and exhibited throughout the play, can be interpreted as a generous explanation of racism for liberal white audience members, who make up the majority of theater-goers, and who have not done the antiracist work of listening to Black voices.

Indeed, Shakespeare scholar Vanessa Corredera applauds Cobb for creating such an engaging, educational performance about racism in America that manages to keep white audience members feeling safe within their sphere of privilege while encouraging them to broaden their perspectives. In “Lessons for Whiteness,” Corredera writes that white audiences should notice and appreciate the work Cobb has put in for their benefit.

She describes *American Moor* as a “gift” for white audience members on the road of antiracism (65). She breaks down three key lessons that *American Moor* offers for white audiences as they move from the “discovery” begun by watching Cobb’s play to taking meaningful action in their lives. First, Corredera suggests that *American Moor* communicates that white people have racist presuppositions that must be discarded. Since the Actor in *American Moor* can quote Shakespeare and use street slang in the same breath, many white people may reevaluate their assumptions about Black people, language, and high-brow/low-brow culture. Second, Corredera argues that *American Moor* warns white audience members to beware of centering whiteness and to center Black voices instead. The play highlights how whiteness forces itself as an invisible norm against which everything else is measured. Instead of doing this, the play insinuates that white people should listen to BIPOC voices instead, noting that Black scholars’ voices could be amplified within the realm of Shakespeare studies, and white people seeking to advance antiracist strategies could listen to Black activists. Third, Corredera argues that *American Moor* implies that white people cannot transform unless they put in the hard work. The Actor invites white people as “fellow travelers on the road” with him to transform society with antiracist strategies (Cobb, “stage directions” n.p.). Additionally, the white director sits near or in the audience, denoting that he is on the same level as the white audience members, and suggesting the audience members could afford to listen more attentively than the director does. The play’s ending is ambiguous—either the director (and audience) can do the work of dialoguing with the Actor (the Actor urges the director to “go deep,” “engage me,” “tell me what scares you” [43]), or the audience can walk away from the encounter without changing the trajectory of their privileged path.

While the Actor plays an instrumental and powerful role as an instructor for white audience members and the director, I argue that the Actor's use of the monologue, distinct from his use of soliloquy, suggests his vulnerability and reliance on the white audience members to listen to his testimony and support him. In the stage directions, Cobb instructs the actor playing the role of the Actor will "address several different amorphous entities, some that are not physically present, and an audience, another amorphous entity, that very much is" ("stage directions," n.p.). This note implies a direct address to the audience as an entity. In the realm of theatrical conventions surrounding character communications, I will again turn to the distinction between soliloquy and monologue, an important difference that implies distinct implications for performativity, truthfulness, and motivation. Although soliloquies can involve indirect communication with the audience, as Iago does in *Othello*, soliloquies are ultimately speaking to oneself without regard to who might be around to hear it, even if there is an awareness that there is an audience present. By contrast, a monologue is distinguished from a soliloquy by a monologue's direct confrontation with another character. The stage directions in *American Moor* state that "the audience will find itself playing many parts" ("stage directions," n.p.). Those parts are not figurative; at points in *American Moor*, the Actor speaks to the audience as a fellow character in the play.

Why is it so important to labor over the difference between soliloquy and monologue in *American Moor*? After all, the Actor fluidly moves between the two forms, in addition to engaging in dialogue with the director and speaking several asides. Perhaps the Actor's soliloquies and monologues simply serve as creative stylistic choices to enhance the viewing experience. However, I argue that the reason why the Actor's use of

monologues is so significant is their implication that the Actor, like Othello, must still perform for white audiences. Despite his clear authority over Shakespeare's language, his eloquence as a speaker, his experience and talent as an actor, and his profound reflections on the state of racism in America, the Actor still must perform for white audiences. Despite his emotional intelligence and vulnerability, his care for the audience and even for the director, his acceptance and patience with the white supremacist society in which he lives, and his endurance with structural racism that impacts his life at every level, he still must perform for white audiences. The Actor's monologues, portraying his harrowing experiences as a Black actor facing ugly discriminatory interactions on his journey to becoming an actor, echo Othello's monologues to the Venetian Senate, the monologues that Othello speaks with the understanding that he is facing white judgment and his outcome depends on their response.

Whereas the Actor's soliloquies display the Actor's raw emotion about the racist discrimination he has faced, his monologues possess a more measured, charismatic tone that helps him connect with, and persuade, white audience members to see his perspective of racism in the theater industry. As the play opens, the Actor, alone on stage, practices a part of Othello's monologue to the Venetian Senate, in which he describes how Desdemona came to fall in love with him through his "discourse," which she would "devour" with a "greedy ear" (6). When the Actor recites the lines describing how Desdemona would return to Othello to hear more stories, the Actor stops after the line "I did consent," for "there's something in this final line for him," and the Actor repeats those words of consenting (6). As the Actor reflects on the line, perhaps feeling pulled by the act of Othello granting consent to Desdemona to embark on a relationship together,

the Actor then becomes aware of the audience, and “it is to them that he begins to speak” (6). The Actor transitions from existing within the confines of the play to breaking the fourth wall—a dramatic technique in which a character acknowledges the presence of the audience and speaks to them directly. Speaking to the audience directly, the Actor begins telling a story of hardships from his life. The communication parallels Othello telling his stories to Desdemona. In his opening monologue, the Actor begins sharing the story of how he first encountered Shakespeare: “I was an English major when I first went to school. I loved the words. But then, I saw Shakespeare... not in a book, but on a stage” (6). The Actor’s opening monologue sets up a story with suspense, engagement, and neutral emotional tone.

The monologue unfolds in ways that demonstrate the Actor’s eloquence, story-telling skills, humor, and intelligence—all carefully sculpted to achieve a desired effect on the audience. Like Othello seeking to increase the growing love between him and Desdemona, the Actor aims “to draw from” the audience “a prayer of earnest heart / That I would all my pilgrimage dilate” (6). In other words, the Actor seeks to use his story-telling abilities to connect meaningfully with the audience, while not letting his guard down completely so as to convey the most charming parts of himself. It is like a man going on a second date with someone he had a vested interest in showing his best self to. The Actor introduces the issue of racism right off the bat: after his first time seeing Shakespeare performed on stage, he confesses, “I realized that the only thing lacking from what I had been reading was me” (6). But what does the Actor mean by him being missing from Shakespeare? The Actor clarifies shortly after. In a humorous, charming, and gentle way, the Actor uses a self-deprecating tone to reveal his exclusion from the

Shakespeare world, based on the color of his skin: “I had been presumptuous enough to buy in to the preposterous notion that I, my intellect, my instrument, and my crazy-ass African-American emotionality could serve the words well, *and* be served well by them” (7). To put it in other words, the Actor is using false humility to show off his intellectual vocabulary while simultaneously noting the color of his skin in a humorous way that white audiences would feel comfortable laughing about.

The opening monologue continues with a steady cadence of jokes to lighten up a serious topic of racial discrimination, continuing to connect with the audience by sharing his experience without allowing negative emotions cloud his story-telling abilities or charm. The Actor quips about a drama teacher leading an acting exercise in which the students would sit in a circle to wait for something outside of them to stimulate them to act. The Actor impersonates his drama teacher and uses exaggerated language to undermine the teacher’s legitimacy: “‘Acting is *reacting*,’ an early drama teacher of mine was quite fond of regurgitating incessantly” (7). In the way the Actor tells the story, we come to believe that the drama teacher must be white because the Actor shares a secret with the audience about why the teacher’s saying was so ineffective for him. Addressing the audience, the Actor confides,

The exercises put me to sleep. And I *was* reacting already. Something that you may not know, young American men of African descent, whether they voice it or not, have a great deal of external stimuli to react to, all the time.
(7)

Again, like the initial instance in which the Actor introduces the issue of racial discrimination in a light-hearted, humorous way (“crazy-ass African-American emotionality”), this second reference to living as a Black American is somewhat light-

hearted and tongue-in-cheek, though more serious of a tone than the initial reference to his racial identity.

As the Actor continues to address the audience directly during his monologue, he references his racial identity a third time, and this time with pride. After he performs a snippet from a soliloquy in *Henry IV*, delivering the words for the audience with bravo and charisma, he says proudly: “I could say that, as well as anyone, and infused with every ounce of my glorious African-American emotional arrogance, it would sing” (8). In this way, the Actor continues his playful performativity, like Iago charming his audience and luring them in to his point of view. Of course, the Actor’s intentions, unlike Iago’s, are intended for good, guiding the audience along a journey towards greater insight and discovery about the Black American experience.

The Actor gradually reveals more of his “crazy-ass African-American emotionality,” as if he is warming up his audience—specifically, his white audience members—for the anger, sadness, and frustration that he will reveal as the show progresses, during his soliloquies. Continuing with his humorous tone, lightening up the painful reality of his discriminatory experiences, the Actor impersonates a previous drama teacher who had “asked us to pick a character from Shakespeare and to prepare a monologue” (8). The Actor was “beyond [him]self with excitement” and chose Titania, the Fairie Queen from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and her “forgeries of jealousy” speech (8). When the Actor announces this to his drama teacher, and the teacher pretentiously corrects his pronunciation of “Titania,” the Actor is taken aback by the teacher’s stuffiness; he replies to his teacher, “Huh?” (8). Subsequently, the Actor quips back to his teacher, “You want I should give you a slap?” (8). The Actor’s comedic

timing and deft ability to turn the story into a funny vignette build rapport with the audience. He adds vulgarity for additional humor: “I mean, what are we talkin’, potayto/potatoh? Grow up! Which one of us is only twenty-two years old, me or you? Ya dick... Anyway...” (8). The Actor’s storytelling is intended to evoke laughs from the audience. Importantly, too, through his measured performativity, the Actor manages to keep white audience members from feeling too challenged or alienated. The confident, comedic, and playful extended monologue the Actor delivers to the audience does not confront the audience as perpetrators of racist discrimination, and also does not scare them with his “crazy-ass African-American emotionality” (7).

As his monologues continue, the Actor’s tone continues to transform into an angry register, while maintaining an artfully crafted, entertaining performance for white audience members. In doing so, he further exposes his deep-seated frustrations about the racial discrimination he has faced, without pushing away his white viewers, who serve a crucial role in spreading his message and enacting change in ways that he cannot. When the audience finally meets the inexperienced white Director who is managing the auditions, the Actor’s interaction with the Director serves as a clear demonstration of the kind of demeaning attitude white people have used with him. The Director interrupts the Actor and barely listens to him, and then he asks if the Actor has any questions for him, “Anything I can make clearer to you before we start?” (13). In the fast-paced, cut-throat theater industry, the lack of niceties or decency is one thing that can make an actor feel insufficient; but the added connotation of imbalanced racial power is another issue that disproportionately affects BIPOC actors in harmful ways. It is the Director’s question, asking if the Actor needs clarifications about the auditioning process or the role of

Othello, that triggers the Actor into a monologue expressing his contempt for people like the Director.

However, the monologue spurred from the Actor's first interaction with the Director begins to blend with the form of the soliloquy, a shift that accompanies the Actor's bubbling anger rising to the surface. From this point, the Actor begins to address his speeches to the Director, but doing so in a way that we understand that the Director cannot hear him. Yet, the Actor is not just addressing the Director—he is also addressing the audience with interspersed comments. Thus, in this soliloquy, the Actor is expressing his innermost thoughts and feelings of what he would like to say to the Director with the awareness of, and for the benefit of, the audience. After the Director's offending question ("Anything I can make clearer to you before we start?"), the Actor begins a monologue by stating to the audience, dramatically, sarcastically, and knowingly, "And *that* is how it begins" (13). This opening sentence demonstrates a level of even-headedness, as if he is teaching the audience about the discrimination he has faced, and the Director has just provided a useful, though nevertheless irritating, example. Then, the Actor turns to the Director and uses the pronoun "you": "And it's just better when *you* guys are a little older... *You* see, it means *you* 've been around long enough to have had the opportunity to know at least as much about Shakespeare as I do, and yet *you* 're not imitating someone imitating someone who thought they knew the poet personally" (14, emphasis mine). With the Actor expressing his thoughts to the Director, understanding that the Director cannot hear him, the Actor's speech moves from the category of monologue to that of soliloquy. Yet, in the same breath, the Actor addresses the audience, understanding that they *can* hear him: "You ever get that? The dudes who say things like, 'And what

Shakespeare was trying to say here is...’ And you wanna say, ‘I didn’t know you knew him like that, Slick.’ It never bodes well, they start with that shit” (14). Gradually, then, the Actor’s communication style transitions from a performative, level-headed, and humorous series of stories—all of which educate and connect with white audiences in ways that entertain and avoid offending them—into a more choppy, and eventually explosive, series of soliloquies responding to the Director’s interactions with him. While the Actor’s monologues to the audience offer a buffer between the audience and the racist white theater industry, his soliloquies close the gap, revealing the audience’s complicity in the problem. It is up to each audience member to decide what actions, if any, they wish to implement after leaving the theater.

Chapter V.

We See You, White Shakespearean Theater

Iqbal Khan's production of *Othello* with the RSC and Keith Hamilton Cobb's original work *American Moor* serve as useful examples for the possibilities of integrated casting and creative efforts to challenge the white supremacist structures of the American theater industry broadly and the Shakespeare industry specifically. Khan's innovative blend of cultural influences—stemming from actors' experiences, not an artificial concept of cultures—in addition to his integrated casting decisions, allowed the production to succeed in reinventing and re-visioning a historically problematic play. Similarly, Cobb's *American Moor* reimagines *Othello* from the perspective of the Black tragic hero, infusing his original writing with structural, literary, and thematic inspirations of Shakespeare's play. Both productions push the needle forward to challenge and dismantle systems of oppression in the theater industry.

The swirling relationship between dramatic arts and social change will continue to evolve in an unpredictable and imperfect trajectory, but if these two theatrical works demonstrate—along with the productive and fruitful conversations surrounding them—the achievements of artists of color to get large groups of white audiences and theater professionals to *listen*, then perhaps it is inevitable for white supremacy to topple and give way to Black and Brown influence in the theater industry and beyond. As dramatic arts blend together threads of visual representation, emotional expression, and a push and pull between artist and audience, the artistic form serves as a powerful tool for change.

Black theater professionals continue to force white theater professionals to *listen*, *see*, and *see themselves*. White leaders in the theater industry, whose influence depends

on the invisibility of their racial privilege and any sense of being racialized, are having the mirror turned onto them. In June 2020, during the tumultuous time of the COVID-19 pandemic, an anonymous group of BIPOC theater professionals, and particularly Black theater professionals, published a set of demands for the white theater industry. Titled “DEAR WHITE AMERICAN THEATER,” the letter includes demands like having a minimum of fifty percent BIPOC representation in actors and theater makers on stage and behind the scenes. In the same spirit of Khan’s genuine infusion of cultural elements in his production of *Othello*, the theater artists clarify in the letter that superficial diversity is not enough. They proclaim, “We are not just our bodies. We insist on intentional, meaningful, and exploratory long-term engagements with us, as cultural workers and audiences” (*We See You White American Theater*). The writers remind white theater professionals of the long history of Black-run and Black-created theater. They demand, “We make our own theater, and have done so for millennia, in our own organizations and as freelance artists. Invest in us in our own spaces, and provide BIPOC artists and our infrastructures free rein over your spaces and budgets so we may do our work on our own terms” (*We See You*). Economic investment in Black artists and Black spaces, in addition to control of spaces and budgets that have been guarded by whites, directly challenge white theater professionals’ financial privilege that keeps white supremacy in the theater industry alive and running. It is one thing to pay lip service to a commitment to diversity—it is another to let go of financial control. Plays written by Black playwrights, like *American Moor*, would be given more space and visibility. By tipping the scales toward equal representation of Black artists and white artists, Black stereotypes held by many whites would be challenged as more white theater-goers are exposed to the

diversity within the Black American population—even if, as Keith Hamilton Cobb writes in the stage directions of *American Moor*, the viewing experience does not “leave them in comfort” (stage directions, n.p.). The powerful testimonial letter “DEAR WHITE AMERICAN THEATER” opened a floodgate of voices that had been silenced for so long. The letter generated a movement called “We See You White American Theater,” based on a foundational message written by the theater artists behind the letter.

The writers conclude their letter with a call to action for white theater professionals to join forces to eradicate the harmful forces of white supremacy. They write, “The elimination of racism in the theater is not up for debate. Become our co-conspirators in antiracism” (*We See You*). Like the uncertainty at the end of *American Moor* of whether or not the white director will hire the Black actor to play Othello, it is uncertain how white theater professionals will respond. But no longer can the structures of white supremacy in American theater remain invisible and suppress the visibility and voices of Black theater professionals. Integrated casting, in its most genuine form, coupled with an integration of cultures, helps to re-cast America. And indeed, antiracist efforts, including integrated casting, have the potential to allow Shakespeare to fully belong to everyone, as artists reimagine and re-cast the seventeenth-century plays into productions that not only express white perspectives, but also celebrate the brilliance of Blackness.

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