

"Othello Was My Grandfather": Shakespeare in the African Diaspora
Kim Hall, Lucyle Hook chair and professor of English and Africana studies, Barnard College
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[Folger ENCORES segment]

So, this spring at the Folger, I wasn't there, but I'm trusting to Mike that it was with the appropriate "pomp, triumph, and reveling," the *American Moor* was inducted into the Folger. I want to conclude with a discussion of this play, and why this public acquisition is an important step for the Folger and for Black Shakespeare. *American Moor* is a searingly honest, deeply humane, theatrical biography told through the actor's experience of first discovering a love of Shakespeare and finding that, as an African American male, *Othello* is an elusive inheritance—something he is expected to carry continually, even if he can never really own it. Like many Black appropriations of *Othello*, it does the dual work of engaging or performing the Shakespeare text, or a range of Shakespeare text, but also making visible the structures of whiteness that exclude them.

Since Paul Robeson's 1943 debut on Broadway, it is a commonplace that *Othello* is a "Black" role, an assumption confirmed by the credits of almost any Black actor. So, when I watched *American Moor* for the first time, I remembered reading the *Playbill* for the famous 1997 "photo-negative" *Othello* starring Patrick Stewart and performed here in DC, and from the bios I saw that almost every Black actor in the cast, even the very young ones, had played *Othello*. So, in reading *Playbills* now, I have come to expect that every Black male actor has been *Othello*, just as I expect that every New York actor will have a *Law and Order* episode in their credits.

On the surface, the ubiquity of this credit suggests that Black men do actually "own" this role. Yet *American Moor* suggests that, like the "acceptance" of Black people in the US, the acceptance of Black actors as *Othello* is entirely conditional. In the tradition of George C. Wolfe's *Colored Museum* and Ntozake Shange's *spell #7*, the play turns a politically savvy eye to this question of Black ownership of *Othello* and, more broadly, to the way—subtle or not—the contemporary theater excludes Black actors, in the case of Shakespeare, reinstating that slash between "Black" and "Shakespeare."

We enter the theater watching Hamilton stand in the corner of an almost empty stage with a copy of *Othello*. When the performance "opens," he moves center stage to tell us "the story of my life" through his blossoming love of Shakespeare, a love he maintains while navigating the theater's and America's assumptions about Blackness that drive Black actors into an endless stream of stereotypical roles. The policing of his place in the Shakespeare world begins early, when in acting class he elects to perform Titania's "forgeries of jealousy" speech. In response, he is told in an agonizing, indirect fashion, that he should perform something he's more right for—Aaron, Morocco, or *Othello*—you know, the Black roles. Cobb first rejects *Othello* outright, seeking spaces where he can display the magic of his craft and of Shakespeare's

language, but he is again and again "given" Othello. And one line is, "While the play's relevance was urged . . . perpetually." The play gives Cobb the space to perform these denied opportunities. The actor is the ultimate code switcher, nimbly moving from Shakespeare's most eloquent verse—Titania, Richard II, and Hamlet make an appearance—to the multiple accents of New York City.

When called for his "audition," that the play mirrors *Othello* becomes increasingly clear.

In the first movement, we are co-conspirators who get to hear the sarcastic, irreverent asides, the things an actor cannot say because he is a student who needs a grade and acceptance or the actor who needs a part. However, in the second movement, we are still insiders, and we're still privy to those thoughts. But we are also the Venetian Senate watching the actor make his case to the duke, who's also the director. The *Playbill* cites Act 5's plea, "Speak of me as I am, nothing extenuate, nor set down aught in malice" (5.2.342-4), but we remain mostly in Act 1's tense moment of possibility when Othello rehearses the story of his life and courtship for the Venetian Senate. Othello's position in Venice mirrors the actor's experience in American theater. It needs his power, his confidence, and his physicality, yet is filled with Brabantios—powerful white men who see him as an exotic who serves their desires, never stopping to consider that Cobb's "extensive experience as me and your limited experience of folks like me" gives him unique insight into both the character and the play.

Hamilton's beautiful writing, the humor and eloquent outrage, propel this performance. We move from his visceral rejection of kinship with Othello, who is, after all, as I stated earlier, a dupe and a murderer—he says, "I was ashamed of him"—to a reluctant embrace and then to the subtle realization that the struggle against Othello and the narrow bigotries of the American theater has given him a profound understanding of the text. His copy of *Othello* accompanies this journey from curiosity to rejection to love. He hurls it across the stage, abandons it, and then lovingly smooths back the pages and talks to it.

The minute the actor accepts that he actually has a connection to Othello and begins to explore what *Othello* means to him, what he knows about *Othello* from also being a Black man in a white elite world, he discovers that Othello is, in fact, on loan. Teachers and directors, through *Othello*, give him Othello only to make the Black actor their mouthpiece for how they understand Blackness or difference. The disembodied director asserts that Othello be understood not through the actual cues the text gives us about the Venetian Senate, but through the young director's insistence that *he* knows what the Venetians are thinking, and sometimes what Shakespeare is thinking, in a way that the more experienced, Italian-speaking Black actor never could. The teacher, the director, the coach all presume a relationship with Shakespeare, while Cobb has to fight for his. The dialogue is one-sided. It is not a conversation between people *about* Shakespeare. It is a conversation with a man given the privilege of authority who speaks *for* Shakespeare to the Black man directed to ventriloquize that understanding.

In her influential essay, "Whiteness as Property," law professor Cheryl Harris details how American society has created whiteness, both as a structure of power and a valuable asset. She argues that:

Whites have come to expect and rely on the benefits of whiteness, and over time, those expectations have been affirmed, legitimated, and protected by the law.

Shakespeare has been one of those valuable properties of whiteness, apparent in a range of institution and structures. Shakespeare institutions have the power of definition and the power of exclusion.

Harris focuses on the ways that law controls the meaning and definition of whiteness. And this is the quote:

Whiteness as a property is also constituted through the reification of expectations and the continued right of white-dominated institutions to control the legal meanings of group identity.

Her descriptions of how whiteness is defined can absolutely apply outside of the law. If one substitutes Shakespeare for "group identity" in her passage, one has a pretty accurate description of some of the state of Shakespeare scholarship, performance, and pedagogy. The US culture wars and debates over cross-racial casting, here and abroad, are all symptoms of the struggle over the right of institutions to control the meanings of Shakespeare and to police, or relegate to the margins, groups or individuals who assert their own right to define the meanings and uses of the Shakespeare text.

Throughout the performance, I was really struck by *American Moor's* parallels with philosopher Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin/White Masks*, which is both a stinging critique of racism and dehumanization of the colonial rule, but also—and I think this is something that a lot of my students kind of miss when they're reading it, because the critique is so powerful—but also a plea for the transcendence of communion. Underlying that text's outrage and tonal shifts between anger, humor, biting satire, and despair, is a plea for the Black man's full humanity, which, like all humanity, is only realized in profound connection with other people. Cobb similarly performs a range of emotions. Even with people the actor loves, like his agent, there's a fundamental disconnect: "He believed me, but he could not understand my lament." The piece is full of interrupted conversations about race and missed opportunities for mutual understanding. The sometimes gentle, sometimes harsh pleas for real conversation ("Talk to me. Show me that you have something besides Brabantio's privilege of place.") accelerate as the play progresses and his "audition" time runs out.

The actor's response to the slings and arrows of outrageous microaggressions—some of you all have been on a campus!—is a Fanonian desire for authentic communication, indeed, communion, but here, using a mutual love of Shakespeare to break down false assumptions about race and Blackness. The actor seems to say, "If I am Othello, then let me tell you who

Othello is and who I am. We can figure out this play (and the predicament of race) if you would only talk to me." The play ends on either an uncertain or hopeful note. The audience has been swayed, but has the director?

American Moor gives Cobb his own space to draw from a full range of Shakespeare to move and delight audiences (and then we can see this as a tradition that includes Henrietta Davis) and a much-needed space for discussion of race. His talkbacks with community and spiritual leaders and with Shakespearean scholars, like Mike and like Professor Ayanna Thompson, who's out here in the audience, are robust and wide-ranging. They've covered—at least the ones that I've gone to—his interpretations of various Shakespeare plays, the audience's history with Shakespeare, the economics of the theater, the protests in Ferguson, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the need for community healing. At the first talkback I attended, a Black mother said, "I feel I understand my son, his anger, better now." In addition to offering a gripping performance, Cobb is willing to do the hard work of listening deeply and pushing for understanding, and the goal of an honest and uninterrupted conversation about race and love. And if I had world enough and time—and in this life it means, if I had money enough—all these talkbacks would be recorded and put in the Folger Library. They would be part of the current metadata of Shakespeare. To have this play in the Folger is not just to celebrate the "Wonder of Will," which Cobb does magnificently through the many performances of Shakespeare's verse, it is to give scholars a space for thinking more holistically about these past 400 years, allowing Black pain, Black genius, and Shakespeare's genius to sit side-by-side for future study.