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Wincing at Shakespeare: Looking B(l)ack at the Bard

AMBEREEN DADABHOY

This article explores how black artists and intellectuals approach, challenge, and appropriate the works of William Shakespeare. Beginning with W. E. B. Du Bois's contention "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not," I examine how Keith Hamilton Cobb in *American Moor* interrogates Shakespeare's presentation of black identity. In particular, I suggest that modes of ambivalence undergird black American engagement with Shakespeare and that this ambivalence creates the space for black artists to interrogate Shakespeare's representation of blackness and white culture's gatekeeping of the Shakespearean text and its performance while also reimagining and recasting that representation to fit their contemporaneous needs.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois proclaims, "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not."[1] As he continues, Du Bois rehearses his familiarity with the Western canon and announces his agency in knowledge production:

> Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the Veil. Is this the life you grudge us, O knightly America?[2]

Undermining Du Bois's right to actively engage with the elite Western intellectual tradition is the racist "color line." Indeed, the peril of Du Bois's epistemological border crossing manifests in his initial act: he sits with Shakespeare but Shakespeare's reaction makes all the difference: "*he* winces not." Du Bois cedes some authority to Shakespeare: this literary giant must be made to recognize Du Bois as fit company. However, as Du Bois moves through his catalogue of thinkers, he interrogates the white supremacist position that excludes black people's participation in such forms of knowledge and humanity. Even

Department of Humanities, Social Sciences, and the Arts, Harvey Mudd College. Email: dadabhoy@hmc.edu.

[1] W. E. B. Du Bois and Eugene F. Provenzo, *The Illustrated Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2004), 147. [2] Ibid.

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as Shakespeare becomes a metric through which Du Bois can exhibit his personal intelligence, capability, artistry, and humanity, and that of all black men and women, Du Bois challenges the white cultural investment in Shakespeare that would proscribe his work from the black imaginary. Subtending much of Du Bois's writing on black art is this struggle with Shakespeare as the authority par excellence of art and culture and black people's ability to access and experiment with that tradition. Investigating black representations of race, "the black Shakespeare must portray his black Iagos as well as his white Othellos," and how black actors modernize and interpret Shakespeare ("the Ethiopian Players tried a new thing. They set the scene in a circus tent; they made the … simple, symbolic scenery a matter of clowns and light jazz music, giving to the old play a series of modern interludes; and then they played the play with vigor and truth"), Du Bois exposes the ambivalence in how black art, intellectuals, and artists confront, manipulate, experiment with, and transform Shakespeare.[3] Such engagements might be motivated by Shakespeare's cultural capital, the implicit notion of Shakespeare's universality, and the explicit way in which Shakespeare engages with black identity in his plays, particularly in *Othello*.

This article explores how black actors have taken on Shakespeare as a barometer of white culture and as a text through and against which to access their subjectivities, to simultaneously express via Shakespeare their alterity and belonging. In particular, I will consider how Keith Hamilton Cobb, in *American Moor*, grapples with the construction of black masculinity in Shakespeare's *Othello* and the hierarchy of the theater system, which he contends limits the possibility of black subjectivity. Cobb's appropriation of *Othello* can be placed in a long lineage of black Shakespearean border crossing. Even as Cobb's play, which is a literal and metaphorical rehearsal of *Othello*, enmeshes Shakespeare's play within the racial schema that it authorized over four hundred years ago, *American Moor* envelops Othello in a familiar embrace of love and acceptance, acknowledging within the white man's construction of black identity the subjectivity of black, diasporic existence. Cobb's conversation with Shakespeare embodies and disrupts the ambivalence underpinning Du Bois's claim, "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not."

Before turning more fully to *American Moor*, I would like to linger with Du Bois. To sit with Shakespeare is something different from embodying his texts: it is to read him, to have his words conjure mental images and impressions, to see the visage of Shakespeare's text in your mind. Reading is an intimate act that requires the reader's complicity for its completion: in a way, to read

[3] W. E. B. Du Bois, "Can the Negro Serve the Drama?" in *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader*, ed. Meyer Weinberg (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 242–46, 242.

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Shakespeare is to have some authority and control over him. For Du Bois, then, Shakespeare's welcome, "he winces not," is an invitation to enter by the gatekeeper of (white) culture and an invitation to the artistic process. This personal moment of sharing space, breath, and mind with Shakespeare is different from the experience of black actors of Shakespeare, however. To perform Shakespeare is to inhabit his characters and their physical and mental geographies, to shed your own subjectivity and embody another. This move can be seen as an act of white racial impersonation and is frequently accompanied by the white audience's racializing gaze, which inscribes the actor within already existing cultural scripts. Crossing the color line in Shakespearean performance is different from Du Bois's border crossing because it involves a hypervisible black body in a cultural geography that has excluded it from such participation.

I reflect on the difference between reading and performing Shakespeare because this seems to be one of the most impenetrable borders of the Shakespeare industry. While we are all encouraged to read, know, and experience Shakespeare, we are not all given equal access to his roles. Negotiating the fraught history of black participation in the Shakespeare industry, *American Moor* is self-aware and self-reflexive. Cobb's play is about an experienced black actor who finds himself auditioning for the role of Othello and contending with a white director who wants him to perform the part as he believes Shakespeare would have intended. The play is a meditation on the walls erected around Shakespeare by those who control its knowledge and production, the politics of *Othello* in performance, and the experience of being a racialized subject in the world of and beyond Shakespeare. Cobb is cognizant of the borders circumscribing black engagement with Shakespeare, borders that confine them to certain (black) roles. As Kim F. Hall notes in her review of *American Moor*, "watching the play, I was reminded of my own amusement at looking at the Playbill for the 1997 "photo-negative" *Othello* starring Patrick Stewart and discovering that almost every black actor in the cast – even the very young ones – had played Othello."[4] Either the role exerts a magnetic pull on black actors, or black actors are typecast as Othello simply by "virtue" of their race. In wrestling with the representation of race, *American Moor* also contends with black perspectives that condemn the play for "encourag[ing] the white way, or rather the wrong way, of looking at black men, namely that black men, or 'Moors' are over-emotional, excitable and unstable," and therefore advocate that no black actor inhabit the role.[5]

[4] Kim F. Hall, "American Moor Review," *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 34, 35 (2016), 524–28, 525.
[5] Hugh Quarshie, "Second Thoughts about Othello," International Shakespeare Association Occasional Paper 7 (1999), 6.

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American Moor intervenes between these two polarities – *Othello* as black or white "property" – arguing for reconciliation via participation in the creative process, a participation that goes beyond simply being an actor/subject hemmed in by Shakespeare's and American culture's scripts, to writing one's own black identity into these texts.[6]

The power of Cobb's play as an appropriation, a challenge, and an homage to *Othello* lies in its manipulation of Shakespeare's structure. A common refrain about *Othello* is that it is Iago's play because he controls the plot and the audience's gaze through the overwhelming force of his language. Cobb divests Iago of this power: the play's Iago, the director, lacks the creative linguistic skill that gives Shakespeare's Iago his agency. 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: it is precisely this disclosure that makes black subjectivity and engagement with Shakespeare specific and particular. The play opens with the actor revealing his exuberant love of Shakespeare, a writer in whose words he finds himself

> at the place where I and his words intersected … I had been presumptuous enough to buy into the preposterous notion that I, my intellect, my instrument, and my crazy-ass African-American emotionality could serve the canon well, *and* be served well by it. I wasn't taught that. I learned it. I felt him, Shakespeare.[7]

At the same time the actor immerses himself in his pursuit of Shakespeare via traditional modes of learning, in college English and theater courses, he finds that the gatekeepers of such knowledge challenge his right to Shakespeare, which is predicated on his race. One professor admonishes, "Pick something you might realistically play. Something befitting your age, and experience."[8]

The professor's racial thinking recalls the historical trajectory of white responses to black Shakespeare, where black engagement is either unfit or skeptically tolerated. Two nineteenth-century white responses to black Shakespearean performance expose the fault lines that emerge around the issue of who can do Shakespeare right/white. In 1821, the Africa Company, "the first recorded black theater troupe in America," opened their season with *Richard III* featuring West Indian-born James Hewlett in the titular

[6] In a discussion at the SAA's annual conference in 2017, Ayanna Thompson spoke about *Othello* as a "white property."

[7] Keith Hamilton Cobb, *American Moor* (collection of materials relating to the run of *American Moor* at the Anacostia Playhouse), Washington, DC: Anacostia Playhouse, 2015), 1.

[8] Ibid., 4.

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role.[9] An account of one of Hewlett's performances is preserved in British writer Charles Mathews's comic travel narrative, *Sketches of Mr. Mathews Celebrated Trip to America*, in which Mathews's comic recitation strips the Africa Company of any theatrical legitimacy:

> The black population being, in the national theatres, under certain restrictions, have to be quite at ease, a theatre of their own. Here he sees a black tragedian (the Kentucky Roscius) perform the character of Hamlet, and hears him deliver the soliloquy "To be or not to be, dat is him question, whether him nobler in de mind to suffer or lift up him arms against oue sea of hubble bubble and by opossum (oppose'em) end em." At the word opossum the whole audience burst forth into one general cry of "opossum, opossum, opossum." On enquiring into the cause of this, Mr. Mathews was informed, that "Opossum up a Gum Tree," was the national air, or sort of "God save the King" of negroes, and that being reminded of it by Hamlet's pronunciation of "oppose'em," there was no doubt but that they would have it sung.[10]

To emphasize the inappropriate nature of black Shakespeare performance, Mathews recasts it as vaudeville, more appropriate for black performers. His caricature depends on the distinction between black speech and the Shakespearean text: the former is found incapable of being elevated to the level of the latter. When Ira Aldridge tackled the role of Othello at Covent Garden a decade later, *The Times* review notes the efficiency of having a black actor in the role, since he could "play it in his native hue." However, his ability to adequately "personate" a black man and speak Shakespeare's language was called into question:

> Mr. Aldridge's Othello, with all the advantage of "*hic niger est*," wanted spirit and feeling. His accent is unpleasantly, and we would say, vulgarly foreign; his manner, generally, drawling and unimpressive; and when, by chance (for chance it is, and not judgment), he rises to a higher strain, we perceive in the transition the elevation of rant, not the fiery dignity of soul-felt passion. His performance in the third act – that overpowering act – was weak … It is, however, our duty to state that Mr. Aldridge was extremely well received.[11]

Although Aldridge found success in his Continental performances, his banishment from the American stage and unfavorable London reception expose his critics' inability to see a black man as capable of Shakespeare. It isn't until almost a century later that Paul Robeson secures the role for black actors and finds purchase within the larger (and largely white) Shakespearean community.

[9] Errol Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 11.
[10] Charles Mathews, *Sketches of Mr. Mathews Celebrated Trip to America* (London: J. Limbard, 1827).
[11] Anonymous, "The 'African Roscius' with a 'Vulgarly Foreign' Accent," *The Times*, 11 April 1833.

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Keenly aware of the history of black participation in the Shakespeare industry, Cobb takes this moment of racist casting and defuses it via his deft construction of the actor's love of Shakespeare in terms of identity and identification:

> Because you see, from childhood, something else that I was not taught but that I learned is that people in our American culture, who are not Black like me, do not respond in the same manner to Black men, like me, raising their voices, even slightly, as they do with one another … or changing tone. They do not respond well to my adamance. And so, as Shakespeare's characters are nothing if not adamant, if I say it, out loud, swollen with my most honest African-American energies, well, suddenly I *am* Titania, or Hotspur, or Troilus, and my emotion, just as theirs, having built and built, it bursts forth from me in unmitigated unexpurgated vernacular.[12]

His black American experience allows him to identify with the range of Shakespearean identities, yet his blackness simultaneously excludes him from such identification in the eyes of so-called authority. We are, then, confronted by *American Moor*'s central paradox: what are the borders of belonging in a pluralistic society?

The "right to Shakespeare" is most fully articulated in the interactions between the actor and director. From the beginning we see the director as dismissive of the actor, his interest more in the actor's physical body than in the man auditioning for him. The struggle between the director and actor mimics that between Iago and Othello over who will control Othello's narrative and the meaning of blackness. In an adroit reversal of the Shakespearean text, Cobb limits the director's speech, rendering him as a text that the actor can always already read. Thus, just as Iago makes Othello's blackness signify in damaging ways to prove to the audience the "truth" they think they already know about him, the actor excavates the truth behind the desiring and hostile white gaze that seeks to circumscribe him in an episteme that determines the meaning and function of blackness within a white supremacist, patriarchal system. The exchanges between the actor and director expose the director's desire to control Othello's meaning even as it excludes a black man who knows what it means to be a black man:

> You're gonna teach *me* something about Othello? … Shut-up and listen. You listen to every last one of us trained and committed, sacrificing, shit-takin', strugglin' daily through the bullshit, bone thug thespian brothers walkin' up in here and tearing off a piece of this play that you couldn't dream of ever gettin' anywhere near, because our experience so far surpasses your anemic awareness on the matter that I might as well be talkin' to a fuckin' monkey. Watch, and listen, and *YOU* might learn somethin'. Then, pick the actor that scares you the most. Because that's what

[12] Cobb, 20.

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Othello does. He scares you by being just the opposite of everything you wanna convince yourself he is, which is the only reason you give him this bum rap into perpetuity, and buy it like gospel, sayin', "Shakespeare said so." You ain't gotta pick me. But you're gonna respect that walkin' in that door, purely by virtue of being born Black in America, I know more about who this dude is than anybody could ever teach you.[13]

The actor exposes the problematic representation of black bodies in *Othello* and the way white directors of Shakespeare position themselves as authorities over "their" Othellos and black actors who inhabit the role. The refusal of the white gaze and imaginary to recognize the lived experience of blackness traps everyone in a cycle that continually reproduces white modes of thought, behavior, and action.

Nonetheless, the play is a work of interrogation and reconciliation. Cobb seeks to demonstrate his title's truth, that an American Moor is possible but only through a dialogue between Shakespeare, directors, and black actors: one that listens to and acknowledges the black actor's subjectivity, that respects the man who inhabits the role Shakespeare wrote, and that lets that man appropriate that role for a new era and geography. Even as Cobb's actor recognizes that in embodying Othello he must "wear the livery that the white man has sewed for him," he challenges and divests himself of that restrictive uniform by claiming the authorial function and the authoritative voice.[14] In his own fashion and without wincing, he looks b(l)ack at Shakespeare.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Ambereen Dadabhoy is an Assistant Professor of Literature at Harvey Mudd College. Her research focusses on cross-cultural encounters in the early modern Mediterranean and race and religion in early modern English drama. Her publications display her critical investments in cross-cultural dialogue and exchange and in linking early modern concerns about race and identity to contemporary ones. Her recent article on *Othello*, "The Moor of America: Approaching the Crisis of Race and Religion in the Renaissance and the Twenty-First Century," discloses how the racial and religious anxieties that attend Shakespeare's *Othello* recur in the discourse surrounding the presidential campaign of Barack Obama.

[13] Ibid., 15–16, original emphasis.
[14] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin/White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 22.

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