We Are Othello: Speaking of Race in Early Modern Studies

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Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice.

— Othello, 5.2.341–42

RECENTLY, IN THE UNITED STATES, NUMEROUS REPORTS OF POLICE KILLINGS OF UNARMED BLACK PERSONS have dominated the media and sparked a public debate that has split largely along racial lines. The eruption of black deaths into the dialogue of the public sphere comes at a time when the thesis of a post-racial, colorblind America has inserted itself into mainstream thinking as evidence of a growing sentiment to move beyond race and erase its explicit and violent history. The post-racial claim professes social progress in the form of a race-free society; it deems race an archaic holdover of bad science and an outmoded category of critical reflection. W. J. T. Mitchell remarks, however, that “one would have to suffer from a very deep form of blindness to ignore the continuing presence of racism in the world today.” The post-racial desire to transcend race comes up against the brutal reality of multiple deaths of unarmed black civilians, forcing an inquiry into its very premise as complicit with the politics of white privilege. “White privilege,” challenges Paula S. Rothenberg, “is the other side of racism.” The serious charge here is that

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1 Othello, ed. Michael Neill (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006), 1. All further references are taken from this edition and are cited parenthetically.


4 Mitchell, Seeing through Race, xi.

white privilege, the open secret of dominant white culture, including academia, is anything but benign. In this essay, I use contemporary events as reference points to initiate a dialogue about Shakespeare and race that sustains the vital connections among the “world, the text, and the critic.” I cannot attempt a comprehensive analysis of race, privilege, and marginalization in higher education and the profession of literary studies, but I would like to engage in a dialogue about making Shakespeare not just relevant but accessible for our time and to use Shakespeare’s own work to generate the terms of the investigation.

I

Toward the end of Hamlet, the prince, with the knowledge that he has been poisoned and is running out of time, asks Horatio to “tell my story” (5.2.302). Hamlet exclaims, “Things standing thus unknown, I leave behind me!” (l. 298), and Horatio understands that it is his job to explain the obscure, murderous in-house drama that has national political significance. Hamlet intends that personal vindication will follow if Horatio will “report me and my cause aright / To the unsatisfied” (l. 292–93, emphasis added). His actions, hidden mysteriously behind a public veil of madness, are to be made legible and his reputation preserved with dignity. So critical and memorable is the prince’s request that Jonathan Gil Harris remarks that “surviving Hamlet is Horatio’s fate,” one that extends to “making Hamlet live on in future narrations, a project that anticipates how Hamlet also survives.” Within humanist ideals of balance and equality in male friendship, both men represent congruency in age, upbringing, and education so that Horatio is the capable and perfect narrator of Hamlet’s life. The play posits, therefore, an important conjunction between Horatio

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8 For a wide-ranging study of this kind, see Brett Stockdill and Mary Yu Danico, Transforming the Ivory Tower: Challenging Racism, Sexism, and Homophobia in the Academy (Honolulu: U of Hawai’i P, 2012).


11 On the humanist ideal of male friendship, as well as its value for social advancement and self-definition, see Elizabeth Hanson, “Fellow Students: Hamlet, Horatio, and the Early Modern University,” Shakespeare Quarterly 62.2 (2011): 205–29, esp. 207–8; Tom MacFaul,
and Hamlet, narrator and narrative subject, friends. By the play’s end, despite the bloody period of “unnatural acts, / Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters” (l. 334–35), Fortinbras joins a collaborative effort of character rehabilitation. Hamlet is borne away to be given a soldier’s funeral: “For he was likely, had he been put on” (l. 350). Hamlet is accorded privileges without any tangible proof of valiant, soldierly behavior that would earn him military rites. This presumption of achievement (“had he been put on”) has outpaced even the dying prince’s desire for narrative clarification to initiate an entirely different program of Hamlet’s biographical whitewashing and protection.

Over the centuries, the Horatian assignment to tell Hamlet’s story has become the business of literary criticism, and, despite the drama’s singularities, Hamlet the man has long found a place among the critically satisfied. Philip Edwards asserts what most critics will likely grant: “It is probably safe to say that in the world’s literature no single work has been so extensively written about as Hamlet Prince of Denmark.” This considerable critical attention functions as a vast collective bid to tell Hamlet’s story and, at the same time, suggests the popularity of the play’s male protagonist with generations of scholars. Hazlitt claimed memorably that Hamlet’s speeches are “as real as our own thoughts. . . . It is we who are Hamlet.” Critics identify with Hamlet personally and see in his doubt and skepticism a philosophy that resonates with their world view and points toward a modern social ethos. The pattern of identification continues in the Oxford editor’s assessment: “Spectators and readers alike feel drawn to identify themselves with Hamlet.” Even more recently, Marjorie Garber reiterates this theme: “Readers, scholars, and actors have over the years consistently identified with the character of Hamlet, finding in his gifts and his foibles an image of themselves.” Importantly, therefore, Marcellus’s affirmation of Horatio as an intellectual—“Thou art a scholar” (1.1.42)—underwrites a compelling attraction to Horatio that leads to a neat

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12 In “Fellow Students,” Hanson remarks that Ophelia’s description of Hamlet as courtier, soldier, and scholar (3.1.151–52) recycle “a Renaissance ideologeme,” an ideal that hardly fits Hamlet since “he utterly lacks the attributes of courtier and soldier” (207). See n. 11.


14 Quoted in Edwards, introduction to Hamlet, 33.

15 Edwards, introduction to Hamlet, 34–35, where he discusses a range of opinions from A. W. Schlegel to Friedrich Nietzsche.

16 Hibbard, introduction to Hamlet, 1.

symmetry: the critic as intellectual telling, in effect, a story of one's own deeply rooted identification with Hamlet. As a “just” man (3.2.49), Horatio is adjudicated to be balanced, fair, equitable, and honorable in his dealings, the man suited to the responsibility Hamlet delegates and the very type of literary critic implicated in the play's cultural afterlife.18

Michael Neill has argued, however, that at the turn of the twenty-first century, Hamlet has ceded its place of favor and prominence to Othello because of the global political shifts that have overtaken contemporary life. “Critics and directors alike,” he writes, “began to trace in the cultural, religious, and ethnic animosities of its Mediterranean setting, the genealogy of the racial conflicts that fractured their own societies.”19 What connects these two plays for the purposes of this essay is that Othello, like Hamlet, issues an appeal to have his story told and his actions explained. Within such a comparative framework, pressure must be applied to the “we” in Hazlitt's “It is we who are Hamlet” to explore what is at stake in the identification so habitually assumed among critics even today. Who are the subjects of this collective “we,” and what is its institutional power? One obvious but too often underappreciated answer is that this claim of identification has been nurtured by an academic industry in which white, male interests were historically epitomized, reflected, and affirmed in this much celebrated, cerebral prince. Hamlet is not only a male protagonist, but he is also white—his iconic black clothing serving to contrast with his pale northern European complexion. The failure among critics to routinely remark whiteness as a fully realized racial category in all-white plays—that is, where all the characters are presumed to be white, unless otherwise noted—enables the normative invisibility of whiteness, which is a sign of its hegemony. This critical failure is a form of protectionism, precluding scrutiny of racialized whiteness, refusing to make it visible and subject to critique, and foreclosing self-inquiry into the nature and purpose of critics' own identification with Hamlet. Hazlitt's privileged category, “we,” has, therefore, multiple referents, including of course a male academic elite but also, most centrally for the purposes of this essay, a white literary intelligentsia whose investments in the project of white invisibility—that is, its hegemonic ubiquity—require attention.

As a consequence, the following question assumes particular significance: despite Othello's potent political relevance for today, where are the voices proclaiming, “It is we who are Othello”? Further, what might such a general absence reveal about our scholarly practices and profession as literary critics? The


19 Neill, introduction to Othello, 1.
unavoidably simple yet pertinent response to the lack of overt statements of identification with Othello is that Othello is black while the cadre of critics in Shakespeare studies has been predominantly white. That is, in a color-conscious society, blackness often functions too easily as the mark of unassailable difference. Blackness, however, registers far more than a deceptively simple superficial barrier, for it represents a body that bears within its material corporeality histories of domination, claims of illegitimacy, and dispossession from black slavery and Jim Crow up to the present where institutional practices seek to maintain an inherited racial status quo.20 The black body produced within these histories has been consistently exposed to threat and subjected to various forms of physical assault and psychic brutality. Ta-Nehisi Coates recognizes this body as the deliberate consequence of sanctioned human choice: “How do I live free in this black body? It is a profound question because America understands itself as God’s handiwork, but the black body is the clearest evidence that America is the work of men.”21 The notion of collective cultural innocence (“God’s handiwork”) crumbles against the stark reality of motivated human action (“the work of men”) to reveal the production of an alien black body enmeshed in a sharply contested racial history.

Importantly, knowledge within America’s racial divide is asymmetrical: blacks have always needed to know whiteness, its rules, discipline, and various forms of corporal punishments, while whiteness has been free of the burden of knowing anything about the cultural intimacies of blackness. “While people of color understand the necessity of being able to read the white system and to know what life for white people is like,” Frances E. Kendall argues, “those of us who are white are able to live our lives knowing very little of the experiences of people of color.”22 The disinterest in knowing is further complicated by strategically willed ignorance. These discrepancies in knowledge affect the capacity and will for a predominantly white class of critics to declare, “It is we who are Othello.” At the same time, the absence of general critical identification with Othello rests on a broadly instituted disaffection and cultural desire to distance oneself from the abjection that is blackness—resulting in an epistemic assault on the black

21 Ta-Nehisi Coates, Between the World and Me (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015), 12.
22 Kendall, Understanding White Privilege, 65. See n. 6.
body—and to repress knowledge of the necessary complicity of whiteness in the seemingly unending manufacture of blackness as a peculiar institution.  

Hamlet and Othello—one white, the other black—desire to have their stories told, and it is perhaps this singular racial distinction that affects the telling, offering an insight into contemporary critical practice as it relates to matters of race. Hamlet appears to have generated a good deal of critical satisfaction; thus, it is my intent to focus more sharply on Othello in order to engage speculatively the dissatisfaction swirling around race, whiteness, and critical reading in early modern studies.

II

Othello’s first act is replete with verbal assaults targeting the play’s titular black man that amount, in Edward Berry’s words, to an “overt and vicious racism.” Importantly, these attacks against the Moor, a salacious mix of claims about monstrous blackness and barbaric sexual conquest, achieve additional meaning within the larger political context of the invading Ottoman forces and situate Othello as the corresponding black threat within. The metaphor of war thus hangs over the play’s action. After the apparent resolution of the very public racial conflict that explodes in the Senate scene, Othello departs in his role as general of the Venetian military. Then, something peculiar happens: at the beginning of the second act, inclement weather intervenes, the Turkish fleet is devastated by a powerful storm, and the military crisis that was to play a significant role in the action disappears. What, as a result, must we make of the remainder of the play? The answer lies in Shakespeare’s use of structural analogy. Shakespeare’s suspension of the Turkish aggression forces us to recognize that conflict continues as a major issue but in the form of an internal “race war” initiated by the play’s resident racist, Iago. In place of the violent clash of military warfare, the audience is treated instead to Iago’s more covert but no less destructive operations that generate Othello’s racial anxiety and self-hate.

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25 See, for example, Janet Adelman, “Iago’s Alter Ego: Race as Projection in Othello,” Shakespeare Quarterly 48.2 (1997): 125–44. Berry observes, “Although Iago’s notorious artistry is usually linked to his capacity to shape a plot, it extends as well to characterization, for the Othello he in many ways creates comes to see himself as his own stereotype” (“Othello’s Alienations,” 319).
To speak of racial conflict today risks being met with disapproval, wariness, or skepticism since the notion might suggest disturbance or upheaval of a kind that is antithetical to the contemporary desire for social stability. But Shakespeare’s notion of a “race war” as expressed in Othello educates us primarily about the correlation of race and violence, indeed, about racism as a form of violent interaction that leaves the targeted individual sensing an assault on his or her humanity. A “race war” also suggests a desired outcome of winning so that Othello’s mounting internalized racism, especially evident beginning with the temptation scene in Act 3, is the necessary correlate for the firm establishment of white racial superiority. Othello’s embarrassed confession of blackness as a stigmatized identity coincides with Iago’s growing control over his black victim’s self-perception, thus reinforcing the dynamic of power between white mastery and racialized blackness that degrades black persons at every level of social interaction. The play dramatizes two different kinds of racial tactics—one explicit and direct, the other covert and invisible—that operate as complementary forms of active racial aggression. Shakespeare’s bold assertion of racial hostility by way of structural analogy constitutes a major political statement about the already evident and unresolved racial conflict in the early modern period for which the play serves as a provocative meditation extending into the modern world.

Throughout the action, in response to perceived racial animosity, Othello resorts to narrative explanation in order to evade entrapment and to achieve exoneration. Specifically, Othello is dramatically presented as telling stories with urgency when his life depends on it, most famously in the Senate scene. Indicted for the social inappropriateness of his dark skin as Desdemona’s husband, Othello deploys narrative as a counteroffensive in this attack on the legitimacy of his black body (1.3.91). Whether in Brabantio’s explicit appeal to Othello’s black skin and the racial disgust it elicits (l. 99) or later in Iago’s callously quotidian reference to “black Othello” (2.3.29), Venice’s racial climate consistently puts Othello on the defensive. At the play’s conclusion, however, Othello experiences another narrative moment, this time with a notable difference. Because death will soon rob Othello of the power of speech, he will have to rely on his immediate audience to be collaborators in telling his story. Speaking or writing about race is central to Othello’s penultimate speech that begins, “Soft you, a word or two before you go” (5.2.337) and ends with his suicide. This speech is typically regarded by critics as exemplifying Othello’s divided self, epitomized by his split loyalties between Christian and Muslim,

26 Othello suddenly confesses a highly racialized self-image because of Iago’s manipulations: “Haply, for I am black” (3.3.266).
European and Moor, and white and black identities.\(^{27}\) Despite this generally accepted and entirely accurate reading of an internal conflict, “turbaned Turk” versus “Venetian” (ll. 352–53), I would emphasize Othello’s stated chief concern regarding a posthumous biography: “Speak of me as I am.”\(^{28}\) Finally grasping the horror of Iago’s deception, which led to Desdemona’s murder, Othello wants the world to know the full complexity of “these unlucky deeds” (l. 340). Othello is, in effect, sensitive not only to the fact of murder, which casts him in the recognizable role of reckless black killer like Aaron his stage predecessor, but also to the perception of the black, racial stereotype of being “easily jealous” (l. 344) as the precipitating factor in his behavior.\(^{29}\) Additional references to himself as “the base Indian” (l. 344) or the embodied, tear-dropping “Arabian trees” (l. 349) multiply images of otherness to suggest how steeped Othello’s language is in racial self-awareness. His act of self-slaughter, an attack on his own body, is designed to punish a racialized self who, like the “turbaned Turk,” has committed the heinous assault on Venice in the person of Desdemona. Framed within the brutal cultural logic of a racist hegemony, the ruination that Iago promised is here fulfilled through a series of lies and machinations that leads Othello to become the agent of his own destruction.

Othello presents a classic Shakespearean tragic conceit: the master storyteller undone by a rival storyteller, Iago, whose baseless fictions are the intended “pestilence” (2.3.341) poured into Othello’s ear. After learning about Iago’s manipulations, Othello is even more anxious about narration, audience, and credibility. Othello understands that, given the play’s imperial geopolitics, the members of his immediate audience will revert to seeing in his blackness the enemy “Turk” within, an identity and status that will require rigorous unpacking and thoughtful explanation. In the play’s closing moments, therefore, unable to ultimately exercise his own narrative agency, Othello will have to delegate and entrust that responsibility elsewhere. Letters and official reports will be “set down” (5.2.342)


\(^{28}\) The installation artist Fred Wilson intuited the significance of this crucial moment in his 2003 Venice Biennale exhibit; see Peter Erickson, “Respeaking Othello in Fred Wilson’s Speak of Me as I Am,” *Art Journal* 64.2 (2005): 4–19.

\(^{29}\) In addition to stereotypes that could have been learned from repeated visits to the early modern theater where stage Moors were represented as violent, dangerous, and criminal, the designation “Moor” by itself signified foreigner, non-Christian (and, therefore, un-English), and black. Anthony Gerard Barthelemy examines the negative black stereotypes in *Black Face, Maligned Race: The Representation of Blacks in English Drama from Shakespeare to Southerne* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1987), esp. 72–146. Barthelemy notes, “It is no exaggeration to say that the overwhelming majority of black Moors who appeared on the popular English stage between 1589 and 1695 endorsed, represented, or were evil” (72).
or written to the Venetian hierarchy, but Othello’s attendant concerns about racial stereotyping that undermines his felt loyalty to Venice leave him doubtful about the final impressions and judgments to be made. What, Othello questions, will be the reports from the military outpost in Cyprus now turned into the fatal scene of his racial undoing? The uncertainty driving Othello’s forthright request for an explanatory story of his actions is, therefore, the matter of the unreliable narrator. That is, among his white, Christian auditors, whom can he trust to tell his story or speak of him in a balanced way? Even more pointedly, who among Othello’s listeners is sufficiently free of racial bias, stemming from stereotyping, to allow for fair representation? Speaking “of” Othello thus has multiple overlapping meanings: speaking for him or on his behalf; speaking about him; and, because of Othello’s blackness, speaking about race.

Like Hamlet, Othello also needs a Horatio-like figure who will disentangle the complex racially inspired machinations that have drawn him into an unbearably murderous conundrum. Horatio the “just” man is imagined as Hamlet’s friend with the added implication of shared class perspectives, cultural backgrounds, and values that are integral to the Renaissance male ideal. Shakespeare’s omission of this figure in Othello or, rather, the deliberate negation of this ideal partner in the person of the false friend, Iago, produces the explicit effect of leaving Othello culturally adrift, alienated, and alone—without a firm conviction that, as a dying black man, he will receive the racially sensitive and responsible representation that he deserves. Othello is justifiably concerned with identifying a reliable narrator who exhibits shared commonalities or the Horatian “just” racial sensitivity suitable for the job. Locating such a person is a consideration that extends beyond the immediate dramatic scenario, with its questions about unreliable narrators, to include contemporary scholars and literary critics, the trustees of Othello’s dying request to tell his story. Can we, contemporary critics, reliably tell his story? At this juncture the full scope of the play’s intellectual demand on us becomes clear, especially given the co-optation of Shakespeare within high culture, specifically elite, white culture, whose authorities include literary critics and constitute an overwhelmingly white demographic.30 For Othello’s speech registers another kind of bifurcation or division, not within himself but for literary critics who are obliged to speak or write across a racial divide emblematicized in the black body. Shakespeare probes

a divided self that represents literary critics’ white racial investments—white racial investments that might impede the ability to become the kind of reliable cultural narrators and race thinkers Othello envisions. The play ends with a disturbing crime, the murder of Desdemona, and relates it to the question of moral responsibility. But part of the play’s genius is to prolong that moral reflection concerning audiences and literary critics as reliable narrators in order to question our complicity in reifying racial divisions as insurmountable.

III

Shakespeare’s metaphor of race as “war” captures the inherent violence of unresolved racial interaction and the social division that ensues. The four-hundred-year history of the United States, as Joe R. Feagin reminds us, is deeply implicated in precisely such an antagonistic racial reality. “It was exactly 350 years from 1619 [the year of the first purchase of Africans in Jamestown] to 1969,” he writes, “the year the last major civil rights law went into effect officially ending legal segregation. Few people realize that for most of our history we were a country grounded in, and greatly shaped by, extensive slavery and legal segregation,” whose reality was brutal and severe. 31 The white abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe concluded from contemporary evidence that “legal power of the master amounts to an absolute despotism over body and soul; and that there is no protection for the slave’s life and limb, his family relations, his conscience, nay, more his eternal interests, but the character of the master.”32 This arbitrary subjection of the black slave’s body to the will of the master sustained the ideological program of white supremacy that justified the idea of blacks as inferior to whites within a transatlantic, colonial trade that enriched Europe and became the bedrock of the United States economy.33 It was to the end of a flourishing plantation economy that Thomas Jefferson perceived and argued a racial division “fixed in nature” that reinforces black inferiority “to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind” and advertises the superiority or supremacy of whites.34 The open exploitation of black bodies not only fueled

32 Quoted in Feagin, White Racial Frame, 35.
the nation’s economic enterprise and made manifest the cultural ideology of white supremacy, but it was also reified in the institutional biases of a white slaveholding elite who shaped the provisions of the Constitution and populated the United States Senate and Supreme Court. In truth, following Feagin, we are not far removed in time from the physical harms endured, the social constraints suffered, and the legal proscriptions levied against blacks under slavery and Jim Crow, especially when we consider the legacy of institutional and systemic racism in unfair housing practices, with its impact on wealth accrued over time, and the current startling rate of the mass incarceration of blacks. In Coates’s words, “Whiteness and blackness are not a fact of providence, but of policy—of slave codes, black codes, Jim Crow, redlining, GI Bills, housing covenants, New Deals.” Race, therefore, with its history of violation of black bodies, stigmatization of inferiority, economic exploitation, legal excesses, and wide-ranging expropriation must be understood as a “thick description,” not the merely “thin” or superficial reference to decontextualized skin color, that can disrupt and deter dialogue and understanding.

The place names Ferguson, Baltimore, and Cleveland have been reconfigured by recent history as flash points in a longer national drama of race in America. The fatal shooting of unarmed teenager Michael Brown by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri on 9 August 2014 sparked nationwide, headline-grabbing protests for months and fueled wide-ranging debates about anti-black bias, state violence, and social justice. Other names of unarmed black males have been added to a still growing gallery of the dead. Among the most widely reported, John Crawford III was shot and killed mistakenly in an Ohio retail store by law enforcement, and three weeks before that on Staten Island, New York, Eric Garner died at the hands of yet another police officer using an illegal choke-
hold. In the following months, Akai Gurley in Brooklyn and twelve-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland lost their lives. A grand jury’s failure to indict the officer involved in the Brown killing further inflamed public passions, strained municipal relations, and exacerbated national perceptions of police brutality. The introduction of cell-phone video helped secure otherwise rare charges or indictments for officers involved in these kinds of incidents and seared horrific images permanently into the digital public consciousness: a lumbering Walter Scott in South Carolina shot from behind by an officer who fired eight times, and a screaming, limp Freddie Gray in Baltimore being taken by police to a transport van and thereafter found to be suffering from fatal spinal injuries. Still, these gruesome incidents continued to mount. The authors of “Unarmed and Black” note that for the first seven months of 2015 “24 unarmed black men have been shot and killed by police—one every nine days, according to a Washington Post database of fatal police shootings” and conclude that “black men were seven times more likely than white men to die by police gunfire while unarmed.” While media attention has focused largely on African American men, the Say Her Name project advocates for justice for African American women in similarly violent situations. At the same time, the Black Lives Matter movement has emerged to...

43 Somashekhar, Lowery, and Alexander, “Black and Unarmed.”
agitate vigorously for accountability and more comprehensive approaches to address racial inequality, possibly signaling "a new era of civil rights activism." In this context of multiple deaths and unresolved outcomes, one person's discomfort with the notion of Shakespeare's construction of racial conflict as a war contrasts with another's frustrated acceptance of its experiential accuracy.

The troubling undercurrent to the killings is the specter of a long, shameful history of white violence and abused, slain black bodies from slavery through the Jim Crow era. It is no wonder, then, that the reaction in the public, on both sides, has been visceral, given this visitation in the form of media reports and images of a haunting history revived. When black lives appear to be under threat, especially from representatives of state power, the stakes are immediately increased, and public concern is, understandably, high. Among the most striking findings was the significant difference in the public reaction to the conversations generated around these killings, a split predicated on racial identity, cultural location, and perception. Established in 1968 by President Lyndon B. Johnson to study the race riots of 1967, the Kerner Commission was unqualified in its summary conclusion: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal." Several studies have since confirmed a continued, growing division that has been exacerbated by the 2008 recession that generated a mortgage crisis and high unemployment.

A snapshot of the public reaction to the black deaths involving police has been captured by polls that show a persistent separation of opinion and experience that is marked by race. The Pew Research Center reports that "by about four-to-one (80% to 18%), African Americans say the shooting in Ferguson raises important issues about race that merit discussion. By contrast, whites, by 47% to 37%, say the issue of race is getting more attention than it deserves." Other surveys support the stated findings of the Pew Research Center polls; see "Gallup Review: Black and White Differences in Views on Race," Gallup, Washington, DC, 12 December 2014, http://www.gallup.com/poll/180107/gallup-review-black-white-differences-views-race.aspx.

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45 Black Lives Matter was actually created in 2012 after the death of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin at the hands of a civilian who was acquitted of the charge, but it has become a visible national movement in the years following with the multiple deaths of unarmed persons at the hands of the police. See http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/.


The numbers concerning trust in the police and the criminal justice system show a similar divergence: “About three-fourths of blacks said they thought that the system was biased against African-Americans, and that the police were more likely to use deadly force against a black person than a white person. Only 44 percent of whites felt that the system was biased against blacks.”49 Taken at different points and by various agencies since the Brown killing in Ferguson, the polls nevertheless reveal a consistent pattern of racial divergence in opinion. Pioneering research conducted over the last decade in the field of social psychology corroborates the disparities in the polls’ stark racial findings. Research on perceived black aggression and the tendency for whites to misread objects associated with blacks as weapons helps to explain the idea of the perennial black criminal in a white-dominant society.50 Researchers have also found that almost 75 percent of those tested showed “automatic White preference” that is consistent with “racially discriminatory behavior.”51 The public’s ability to perceive and speak coherently about black persons is fundamentally undermined by the kind of racial disjunction Othello intuits and that has become even more socially, economically, and perceptually “thick” and pronounced with time.

Robert P. Jones alleges that self-segregation, whites having little routine, daily contact with blacks and other racial and ethnic groups, plays a significant role in the current state of divided perceptions. Using “social networks” theory, he explains:

The social networks of whites are a remarkable 91 percent white. White American social networks are only one percent black, one percent Hispanic, one percent Asian or Pacific Islander, one percent mixed race, and one percent other race. In fact, fully three-quarters (75 percent) of whites have entirely white social networks without any minority presence.52

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Offering a broader historical and theoretical framework, Charles W. Mills describes a “racial contract” wherein a white polity seeks to maintain the security of its vested social and political interests in a forced agreement between races. In this intense climate of separatism and contest, Judith Butler perceives a destructive racial logic at work. Whites regard blacks “as threats even when they do not threaten, when they have no weapon, and the video footage that shows precisely this is taken to be a ratification of the police’s perception.” Because blacks threaten, according to this thinking, one can justify the disposal of life in such an anxious, perpetual state of self-defense. The devastation of black bodies by state authorities, moreover, does not register the same measure of alarm for whites as it does for blacks since such destruction works offensively to protect white interests and privilege: “But those whose lives are not considered to matter, whose lives are perceived as a threat to the life that embodies white privilege can be destroyed in the name of that life.” This brutal mix of physical violence in the service of ideology elicits the phrase “race war” from Butler who, like Shakespeare, seems to understand the profoundly violent nature of the callous exploitation of blackness. Butler’s assessment of racial violence linked to white privilege allows for a transition to the undercurrent of tension that circulates in predominantly white academic disciplines.

IV

Literary scholars, specifically Shakespeareans, are not impervious to the cultural biases and strategies deployed within white dominance that set up a contentious relationship between diverse racial groups. Structural inequality that is the legacy of sanctioned racism—whether in the form of black slavery or a discriminatory criminal justice system—continues to be reinforced by its progenitors: white supremacy and white privilege, the latter being a less explicit form of domination but no less consequential and harmful. As subjects working and writing under the historical legacy and contemporary circumstances of a divided society described earlier, it would be nearly impossible

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55 Sullivan remarks that, in contrast to white supremacy’s “conscious, deliberate forms of white domination,” today “white domination tends to prefer silent tiptoeing to loud stomping” (*Revealing Whiteness*, 5). See n. 6.
not to be affected. Barbara Trepagnier’s observation, “No one is immune to ideas that permeate the culture in which he or she is raised,” must extend to the professional culture within which one experiences intellectual gestation and growth.57 Thus the pertinence and urgency of Othello’s request for us to tell his story must be restated as a major disciplinary concern. In the current state of racially divided American society, how might literary scholars responsibly tell Othello’s story or, more broadly, speak and write reliably about race? And, given race’s deep historical roots, it does not appear that the subject can be avoided altogether—nor should it. The task is made more difficult when forms of denial set in.

A few years ago at a Shakespeare Association of America (SAA) meeting in Boston, a seminar participant declared with intensity that “Othello is not about race.”58 The seminar was devoted to a discussion of the play, and, not surprisingly, some of the contributors, including me, had proceeded with the assumption that Othello constitutes a major intervention in the emergence of a racial discourse and examination of the attendant asymmetries of power in the early modern period. Several minutes later, still dissatisfied with the flow of the discussion, the same participant reiterated the claim, insisting yet again that “Othello is not about race.” The remark was to serve as a corrective, an attempt to stem the critical tide of a misguided and erroneous enterprise that identified Othello with race. The speaker’s strong denial appealed to the fantasy of historical accuracy that would banish race talk as a dangerous anachronism. Indeed, Michael Neill reports that “the most striking thing about the very earliest responses to the tragedy is that they pay no attention to what, from a modern perspective, seems its most conspicuous feature—the interracial love affair.”59 But Kim Hall points out that for over two centuries white actors blackened their skins. They did so up until the 1814 Drury Lane performance by Edmund Kean in which he instituted the so-called “Bronze Age” of Othello in performance because a lighter skin tone appeared requisite to suit a public taste that had grown to associate blackness with the denigration of slavery.60 I understand

58 “Othello, Part One” seminar, Shakespeare Association of America meeting, Boston, MA, April 2012. The discussion that follows seeks to extend the argument in practical terms but must not be taken as a criticism of the Shakespeare Association of America, a professional association that has been institutionally supportive of addressing matters of race and racial politics.
59 Neill, introduction to Othello, 1.
60 Kim F. Hall, “Othello and the Problem of Blackness,” in A Companion to Shakespeare’s Works, 357–74, esp. 358. In the introduction to Othello, Neill admits that “from the end of the seventeenth century . . . the hero’s colour was capable of generating the most intense anxiety amongst viewers and critics alike” (2).
Hall’s statement as confirmation that the play’s attention to color differential was significant and consequential from the earliest performances.

To dismiss race in _Othello_ as anachronistic and misplaced, therefore, constitutes an appeal to historical accuracy that recalls the old debates of the 1990s when early modern race studies was in its emergent period. Fetishizing historical accuracy is to claim the high moral ground of sound scholarship, a position from which to disguise resistance to race work, from which to promote a singular perspective and methodology as acceptable while placing firm restrictions on others. Two panel sessions at the 2013 SAA conference in Toronto—“Race: Medieval and Early Modern” and “Race: Early Modern and Transatlantic”—seemed poised to serve as major platforms to investigate the state of the art in race studies and reflect on the future of the field. Instead, a few panelists, some more attenuated in their views than others, seemed mired in the kind of skepticism that gave rise to the same arguments about anachronism and hence questioning of the legitimacy of the early modern race project altogether. About anachronism and the disputed term “race,” Ania Loomba and Jonathan Burton observe that racial constructs have taken multiple, different modes over time, so “it makes less sense to try and settle upon a precise definition or indeed to locate a precise moment of origin for racial ideologies than to delineate the ways in which they order and delimit human possibilities through a wide range of conjoined discourses and practice.”\(^{61}\) Indeed, more is at stake in the acts of resistance in my cited examples where a driving ideology limits and places constraints on “human possibilities through a wide range of conjoined discourse and practice.”

My experience sitting in that room directly across from the speaker demanding that “_Othello_ is not about race” was akin to Tim Wise’s description of the effect of white privilege and power in social intercourse: “That which keeps people of color off-balance in a racist society is that which keeps whites in control: a truism that must be discussed if whites are to understand our responsibility to work for change.”\(^{62}\) As a result of the heated declaration, was I, as well as other like-minded members of the seminar, supposed to recuse myself from the conversation, return to silence, and abandon the project of race in the early modern period because I had been duly chastised about a gross error in scholarship? Was I, as a result, supposed to yield control over the proceedings to the bearer of the claim? On my part, such withdrawal, imposed silence, and delegitimization within an academic and professional arena would epitomize the “off-balance” racial experience, discussed by Wise, from which whiteness draws


its superiority and power. I would suggest that the assertive claim, "Othello is not about race," is contextually, in Adrienne Rich’s words, an example of “White solipsism: To think, imagine, and speak as if whiteness described the world.”63 For the injunction would drain the proceedings of all critical race analysis, mute the significance of Othello’s skin color differential, remove all trace of intersectional politics, and mark a return to broad humanistic discourse, while producing a strategically bland whitewashed text whose primary goal is evasion.

At the 2011 gathering of the SAA in Bellevue, Washington, Margo Hendricks delivered a panel presentation paper titled "‘I saw him in my visage’: Problems with Race Studies in Early Modern English Literature."64 In an impassioned address, Hendricks lamented what she saw as the growing metaphorization of race among the already large number of publications that took race as their ostensible subject or wore it as an ornamental label betraying a fashionable gesture to the topic’s trendiness. Drawing on Desdemona’s famous admission, “I saw Othello’s visage in his mind” (1.3.250), Hendricks called attention to Desdemona’s looking away from the fact of Othello’s blackness to focus on her own mental construct or imagining of Othello’s reality.65 In this reading, Othello’s mind is only accessible as a projection of the observer’s fantasy. Like Desdemona, Hendricks argues, contemporary Shakespearean scholarship, especially as practiced by white scholars she implies, has made race into whatever it wishes, “envisioning race everywhere but the body.”66 Hendricks’s insistence on the black body is meant to challenge what she sees as the erosion of the materiality of race and to check the negation at the heart of much recent race scholarship that “has served to de-politicize the politics of race in Shakespeare studies as well as Renaissance and early modern studies.”67 What is at stake in Hendricks’s reading, I would argue, is a critique of white privilege in the practice of literary criticism, where whiteness is a position from which one speaks and writes, an ideological location grounded in membership within majority culture. With such an investment in one’s own privilege, how reliable might one be as a narrator speaking across the social boundaries of racial difference?

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64 Margo Hendricks, "‘I saw him in my visage’: Problems with Race Studies in Early Modern English Literature," paper delivered as part of the panel presentation “Black Studies in the English Renaissance” at the Shakespeare Association of America meeting, Bellevue, WA, April 2011. Hendricks generously shared this paper with me.
66 Hendricks, “‘I saw him in my visage,’” 5.
67 Hendricks, “‘I saw him in my visage,’” 4.
In this final section, I conclude by considering the possible implications of Othello’s request to “Speak of me” by distinguishing among “speaking of,” “speaking for,” and “speaking about.” “Speaking of” Othello, that is, speaking and writing about race within the discipline, requires unpacking one’s white positioning to reach toward new forms of racial knowledge. Speaking of Othello is an invitation to see and engage from a conscious, racialized perspective (whiteness is a race too) in order to better understand race, its dependence on contested categories of difference, and the contractual complicity exercised by the dominant culture in sustaining white innocence and a strategically requisite ignorance of oppression. Barbara Applebaum submits that “whites have a positive interest in remaining ignorant because this serves to sustain their moral self-image” without having to contend with the cognitive disturbance of burdensome racial knowledge. Such recognition will require the reconsideration of one’s own part in this destructive, parasitic construct of power that is race and racism, especially important in a dominant culture where white privilege enables intellectual stasis, political inaction, and selective professional disaffection. To speak of Othello will also include listening to members of nondominant groups in order to expand awareness that might lead to effective change and introduce relevant perspectives that can better facilitate speaking of others.

At the same time, feminist and postcolonial critics have interrogated the gesture of “speaking for” another as an act of ownership and erasure that reinstalls a privileged subject and strengthens existing hierarchies. Speaking for another, some maintain, is a form of imperialism that ensures mastery over the one spoken for. A radical formulation would suggest that one could only speak for oneself in order to avoid various forms of expropriation. Despite the claim to ethical responsibility as the rationale for this stance, that is too easy a way out. Drawing on Foucault’s notion of “rituals of speaking,” Linda Alcoff understands speech acts as embedded within discursively dense communication networks that do not permit any simple peeling away or unique separation. It is futile to think “that one can retreat into one’s discrete location and make claims entirely and singularly based on that location that do not range over others, that one can

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69 In *Being White, Being Good*, Applebaum notes that although listening to others for counteractive knowledge is crucial, not “all members of oppressed groups automatically have such knowledge” (40). See n. 23.
disentangle oneself from the implicating networks between one’s discursive prac-
tices and others’ locations, situations, and practices.”73 Alcoff argues further that
the retreat option, by its own design, “allows the continued dominance of current
discourses and acts by omission to reinforce their dominance.”74 This would
mean that in the instance of race, not speaking for those subjected to its margin-
alizing and alienating effects might further negate its problems through neglect
and gradually erase it from our social agenda through practiced ignorance, at the
same time leaving intact white dominant frameworks.

I would suggest that we approach Othello’s request for a responsible,
explanatory narrator as an invitation to make legible the “continued dominance”
of the forms of racial discourse that misread Othello’s social location as a black
man. Through the heuristic construct of the critic’s divided self—racially white
but having to tell a black man’s story—the play positions its audience to have its
racial knowledge and intelligence tested. Feminist and postcolonial critiques
notwithstanding, the proposition Othello offers concerning white auditors
speaking for a black man engages the question of responsibility to others
through a rigorous self-examination. Moreover, the refusal to speak for another
might, in specific contexts, result in ignoring the mandate for coalition building
toward social justice and equity, in abjuring the responsibility to speak for
others who sometimes lack the resources to speak for themselves (quite literally,
Othello will be dead), and in protecting the interests of a white racial status
quo. Patricia Williams affirms insightfully that “the solution to racism lies in our
ability to see its ubiquity but not to concede its inevitability.”75 The goal of an
inclusive, plural society involves precisely the issue of successfully bridging the
racial divide that Othello proposes: the “imaginary exercise of taking to mind and
heart the investment of oneself in another, indeed the investment of oneself as
that other.”76 That is, in Shakespearean shorthand, the articulation of a self-
interrogating critical credo, “We are Othello.” To “speak of” Othello demands
the informed self-inquiry embedded in the assertion, “We are Othello.”

Finally, “speaking about” race means positioning whiteness in relation to
other social identities and classes, exchanging exceptionality for the collective
solidarity of coalition building. Rather than preserve whiteness as a protected
category, one understands and accepts the shared intersectional interests that

73 Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” 20. In the real social spaces of our dynamic
communities, she adds, “there is no neutral place to stand free and clear in which one’s words do
not prescriptively affect or mediate the experience of others” (20).
75 Patricia J. Williams, Seeing a Color-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race (New York: Farrar,
Straus, and Giroux, 1997), 68.
76 Williams, Seeing a Color-Blind Future, 69.
speaking race requires. Framing the recent killings of blacks within a renewed vision of the civil rights movement for contemporary America, the hip-hop artist and actor Common, who renounced homophobia in his own lyrics in 2007, reflects in a recent speech, “I realize that I am the hopeful black woman who was denied her right to vote; I am the caring white supporter killed on the front lines of freedom; I am the unarmed black kid who maybe needed a hand but instead was given a bullet; I am the two fallen police officers, murdered in the line of duty.” Here is a voice giving a modern take on “It is we who are Othello.” Speaking race enlightened by this level of intersectional identity and awareness can do justice to Othello’s request, “Speak of me as I am,” and inform our disciplinary endeavors as responsible, reliable scholars working in a real twenty-first-century world of change for Shakespeare in our time. Shakespeare, a figure who already unites us in a broad collaborative scholarly endeavor, can prove instrumental in helping us recognize and talk about the barriers that divide us and suggest ways that we can rethink and improve on our collective responsibility of living together in a plural society.


My transcription from Common’s acceptance speech at the Golden Globes awards ceremony on 11 January 2015.