

**Shakespeare and Race**  
**Seminar Leaders: Brinda Charry and Virginia Mason Vaughan**

**ABSTRACTS**

Patricia Akhimie

Mutability and Indelible Difference

In this paper I argue that, in the conduct-obsessed culture of early modern England, two competing and contradictory beliefs about the nature of social difference emerged. The first of these was an ideology of cultivation, a widespread belief that social identity was malleable, that socio-economic status could be determined by measuring an individual's adherence to accepted codes of conduct. The second belief depended upon the idea that social difference was fixed and naturally determined, and thus that somatic differences such as sex and race were deeply significant. For those bearing stigmatized somatic marks, particularly women and non-Europeans, access to cultivating strategies was systematically circumscribed, and this process of socio-economic differentiation was understood as the natural consequence of bodily difference. As I show, the conduct system was based on more than a binary opposition between civil and uncouth, English and other. Instead, it posited a spectrum of capacity to enact and interpret behaviors. One result was epistemological violence by which certain groups came to be characterized—marked—by a deficit of capacity in these respects, not only an inability to be better, but also an inability to know better in the first place.

John Ford

The Politics of Memory: Performing and Erasing Race in *The Tempest* and *Othello*

*Othello* and *The Tempest* employ strategies of re-writing and “re-acting” themselves to recover or deconstruct such a volatile category as “race.” Does doubling, with the memories it evokes, work to validate racial constructions, giving us their ocular proof? Or does the very performance of race inevitably work subversively to re-enforce the “unreadability” of race? Do Othello's and Caliban's performances function as implicit critiques or collaborations of cultural memories? This paper looks at productions by Janet Suzman, Peter Brook, and ACTER to suggest that our cultural obsessions are absorbed into the contradictory languages that claim both Othello and Caliban for their own. Both characters are presented as impossible hybrids made up of multiple contradictory elements.

M. Lindsay Kaplan

### Challenging the Balibar Consensus: The Medieval Theological Contribution to Somatic Antisemitism

Recent scholarship in the medieval and early modern periods has taken issue with a long-held view that the concept of race cannot exist prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the discourses of nationalism and biology necessary to articulate and “prove” racial difference emerged. One counter-argument used to support claims that ideas of race exist in prior eras posits that discourses of racial difference need not be grounded in ‘biology’ or ‘nature.’ This line of reasoning draws on the work of Étienne Balibar, who identifies in contemporary France a racism based on cultural, not “natural” difference. Balibar argues that this ‘neo-racism,’ is not, in fact new: “A racism which does not have the pseudo-biological concept of race ... has always existed,.... Its prototype is anti-Semitism.” In this essay I examine Balibar’s assumptions about the cultural basis of early antisemitism and show how scholarship relying on his premise has allowed for a misunderstanding of the role of Christian thought in the formation of *somatic* racial discourses about Jews. I then demonstrate the way in which the supposedly “cultural” discourse of theology actually posits bodily consequences, providing the basis for a medieval racial conceptualization of Jewish difference as physically immutable, hereditary and inferior.

Carol Mejia LaPerle

### “Faith—and secrecy’: Massinger’s Donusa and the Ornaments of Conversion”

“Faith—and secrecy’: Massinger’s Donusa and the Ornaments of Conversion” tackles the radical effects of cross cultural desire in Philip Massinger’s *The Renegado*. The depiction of the alluring Muslim woman is inextricable from the representation of her elaborate ornamentation. In the Muslim princess’s temptation of the unwitting Christian man, the stage directions convey that her seduction is accompanied—and enabled—by an elaborate display of money and jewelry. The ornaments of Donusa’s seduction are metonymical of the material gain of Western merchants in Turkish commercial interactions, as well as a metaphor for the sexual conquest of her virginity. Thus, ornaments later worn by Vitelli, the Christian male, mark him as having “turned turk.” That he ultimately resists conversion is depicted as a mutation of the meaning of these Turkish ornaments: stripping Donusa’s elaborate gifts from his body, Vitelli performs a defiance that anticipates his later reappropriation. Vitelli enacts the play’s fantasy of the western, Christian man’s mastery over foreign ornaments— a mastery that carries over into the religious

conversion of the foreign woman, fulfilled through Vitelli's revision of the Tunisian court execution into a Christian marriage and baptism.

Joyce G. MacDonald

Civil Rights Shakespeare: "The African Company Presents Richard III"

Shakespeare's role in constructing a British national identity has received much critical attention, as has his status as a hegemonic target for postcolonial reconstructions of cultural authority. My paper, however, will address the degree to which Shakespeare may be appropriated straightforwardly, to play a central role in asserting African-Americans' status and capacity as cultural workers. My test case will be Carlyle Brown's "The African Company Presents Richard III," (1987) a play that is equally concerned with celebrating the work of actor James Hewlett and impresario James Henry Brown--pioneers of an African-American theatrical tradition--and with unironically claiming Shakespeare as the vehicle for a potent declaration of a politically-conscious black aesthetic. Brown's interest in identifying Shakespeare as the avatar of black self-fashioning in the early republic differs markedly from postcolonial ambivalence towards his power, and marks a different trajectory in contemporary formulations of Shakespeare's place in the post-Civil Rights era of U. S. history.

Marianne Novy

Race and Othello's Role as an Outsider

In some respects, Othello might be considered Shakespeare's most admired male outsider. Neither Shylock, nor Malvolio, nor Caliban is praised by apparently neutral characters as "valiant," "brave," "worthy," and "noble," as Othello is praised by the Duke of Venice and by Montano, his predecessor as governor of Cyprus. None of these characters has a speech describing his history that is given the endorsement of the Duke's "I think this tale would win my daughter too." But before these speeches we hear Iago's hate-filled attack on the "old black ram." So, though all Shakespeare's outsiders are portrayed complexly, Othello, as Bartels has suggested, is particularly characterized by polarized positive and negative images.

Shakespeare gives many of his outsider characters speeches in their self-justification, in which they argue that they are similar to or better than those in the majority, and/or that their aggressive behavior is a response to others' bad treatment of them (cf. Shylock's "If I am a dog, beware my fangs," and Emilia's "The ills we do, their ills instruct us so). The closest to the first of these tropes in Othello's speech is his reference to his royal ancestors, and his justification of his killing of Desdemona because of her imagined

behavior is quite different. He never directly refers to particular stereotypes of Africans or Moors, whether to say that he is not like them or to say, later, that he will behave according to them (when he denies being motivated by appetite in wanting Desdemona with him, he doesn't suggest his listeners will think he is lustful because he is a Moor, though Loomba and Burton show this was a frequent association). Yet as the play develops he does think Desdemona might have betrayed him "haply for I am black," and will eventually commit himself to "black Vengeance." Neill argues that imagery in the play racializes Othello's violent behavior.

I will explore the effect of the difference in Othello's self-references from those of the other outsiders, considering, for example, its relation to the play's tragic genre. I will also consider the effect of the play's additions to its sources in Iago's racist language and in praise of Othello near the end. I hope to integrate some recent research by social psychologists on implicit racial bias as a partial explanation for the ambiguity--which I think persists--about whether this is a racist play or a play about racism, among other issues.

John Proctor

Suckling at the Teat of Acceptance: Othello in three parts

This essay considers the relationship between race, identity and perspective in the theatrical event of Othello in performance. There is an experiential relationship shared between the character in the fiction of Shakespeare's play, the black actor (in contemporary American casting tradition) playing the title role, and the odd experience of typically being one of very few black people in audiences of *Othello*. This comparison barely scratches the surface of any of these considerations.

Adele Seef

South Africa's *Othello*

*Othello* is "better understood here than any of Shakespeare's plays:...its hero (a coloured man) who has moved and won a white lady, ships, a bay, soldiers, a castle, and a governor, being all familiar to the colonist's ear, as household words." So wrote the reviewer for the South African Commercial Advertiser about a 1855 performance at the Cape Colony. Only twenty years earlier the critical response was outrage as a reviewer inveighed against Christians for watching such an atrocious, immoral, and indecent piece as Othello.

And so goes the reception history of this text. In the face of the competing discourses surrounding Othello, the play refuses to be pinned down. For some, it is pre-eminently a play about race. For others, it is a play about class. To others, it is a play about gender. In this paper, I will use Janet Suzman's 1987 production of the play at the Market Theatre,

Johannesburg with actor John Kani as Othello and an indeterminately black Bianca as a case study. I will explore how both Suzman's casting choices and the range of speech patterns—coded for color and class—used by her actors help set up the racial, gender, and class hierarchies within which this play operates. I will argue that the 1987 South African cultural with its own fractured identities, multi-ethnic histories, and multilingual populations overlays and complicates the complex strategies of the text and its oscillations between gender and blackness, patriarchy and class.

Gitanjali Shahani

### Racial Transformations and the Early Modern Spice Trade

This paper charts the intricate trajectories of what Salman Rushdie has famously called “the hot stuff”: pepper, clove, cardamom, cinnamon, nutmeg, mace, and ginger. In particular, it is the cross-cultural transactions they sparked between early modern England and the East Indies that I take up here. Their entry into the English household and their incorporation into the English diet were accompanied by pervasive anxieties about mixing and mingling with foreign entities. The fear of heathens, the threat of racial contamination, the dread of what we might retrospectively term miscegenation, variously coalesced onto these condiments, even as they became highly coveted objects of conspicuous consumption in the early modern household. In this essay, I draw on a range of texts in which spices—their acquisition, as much as their consumption—are seen as having the potential to transform what one character calls “my native dye.” If ‘students of physic’ like Timothie Bright and Thomas Tryon worry that their ingestion could potentially turn Englishmen to the hue of the Indians that produced them, dramatists like Thomas Middleton depict Indians as metamorphosing into fairer creatures simply by proffering spices to English merchants. Threatening, redeeming, and expedient by turns, these transformations reveal much about the fluid conception of physiognomy, diet, and disposition in the early modern period. We might treat these as case studies for a larger consideration of an emergent racialist thinking that draws on a range of discourses—humoral, geopolitical, religious, mercantilist, among others.