**Transcript of "Making Blackness"**
By Professor Ian Smith (Lafayette College)

With welcoming remarks by Owen Williams (Folger Institute) and
Introduction by Jean E. Howard (Columbia University)

April 22, 2023, at the Martin King Luther Jr. Memorial Library

**OWEN WILLIAMS**: When we originally invited Professor Ian Smith to deliver the Shakespeare Birthday Lecture slated for April 2020, little did we know that a worldwide pandemic would shift that occasion online, first, as a virtual presentation in 2021 called "Whiteness: A Primer for Understanding Shakespeare" with The Folger Institute's Executive Director, Dr. Kathleen Lynch, and then in April 2022 as part of the institute's series of ten Critical Race Conversations. In that conversation, Folger Director Michael Witmore and Professor Smith turned the emphatic statement often heard when violence breaks out in America, "This is not who we are," into a querulous question, which highlighted the tension between the optimism usually associated with that phrase and the denials that are at the core of our nation's grappling with race.

**WILLIAMS**: If you have not yet viewed that conversation, I invite you to visit The Folger's YouTube channel to experience it and the nine other conversations in the series, which range from race in Shakespeare and performance to how college professors might cultivate an antiracist pedagogy in their classrooms. We plan to have a recording of this lecture made available soon. In the meantime, please share with your friends and students the Shakespeare Unlimited podcast about Professor Smith's book, *Black Shakespeare: Reading and Misreading Race*, that was released earlier this year.

**WILLIAMS**: The Folger is proud to partner with the District of Columbia's Public Library, in particular, the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library that hosts us tonight. DCPL has been instrumental in opening library locations in every ward to The Folger's Programming and Performance team as we share exhibitions that put Shakespeare's First Folio in conversation with go-go and punk music and stage *Our Verse in Time to Come*, cowritten by Karen Ann Daniels, The Folger Director of Programming and Folger Theatre Artistic Director, and Malik Work, in collaboration with Devin E. Haqq.

**WILLIAMS**: All this is part of the citywide Searching for Shakespeare initiative, which continues through the end of April to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the First Folio's publication. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that we sit on the ancestral lands of the Nacotchtank people, also known as the Anacostans, and in an area that served as a trading post for numerous tribes in the Chesapeake. Today there are over a dozen tribes in the region and an estimated four thousand indigenous people living in Washington DC. I will now hand over the proceedings to

Professor Jean E. Howard, the George Delacorte Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University, and a long-time friend of The Folger.

**JEAN E. HOWARD**: Good afternoon, everyone. I'm honored tonight to be introducing the intellectually audacious Ian Smith as this year's Folger Birthday Lecturer. Professor Smith is one of this country's leading scholars of early modern race. After receiving his BA from the University of the West Indies, advanced degrees from the University of Paris, and then his PhD from Columbia University, Smith has taught for several decades at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania where he is currently the Sell Professor of English.

**HOWARD**: This coming fall he will take up a professorship at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. Professor Smith is a meticulous teacher, as well as a dazzling scholar. He leans into the language of the texts he teaches, highlights their overlooked details, and thus teases into visibility the half-submerged shadow life of complex works of art, and he teaches his students how to do the same.

**HOWARD**: His scholarship is notable for its careful parsing of the verbal complexity and for its incisive excavation of the material stage practices, the technologies of fabric, coal dust, and oil, by which white actors have historically impersonated black characters. Professor Smith's first book, *Race and Rhetoric in Renaissance England: Barbarian Errors*, was revolutionary for forging links between the Renaissance recovery of classical learning, especially classical rhetoric, and the forging of early modern racial distinctions.

**HOWARD**: Smith argues that the racial other, the “barbarian,” was often defined in the early modern period in terms of rhetorical faults or failings, "barbarisms," as they were called, and "Africanisms." Smith thus made clear that early modern moods of racialization did not depend solely on the color binaries that structure much of contemporary American understandings of racial difference, important as those were then and are now.

**HOWARD**: Smith's bold new book, *Black Shakespeare: Reading and Misreading Race*, has just been published by Cambridge University Press. It challenges white readers in particular to take on board the myriad ways in which race permeates Shakespeare's plays. Smith argues that dominant ways of reading Shakespeare employ a white epistemology that distorts and obfuscates the play's racial meanings.

**HOWARD**: At its heart, Black Shakespeare offers a simple injunction, “read better,” meaning read for the racial structures that inform these plays and for the racial pain and privilege that are revealed within them. *Black Shakespeare* generously teaches us how to do that kind of reading. For Smith, a great deal hinges on our being able collectively to learn this new way of reading.

**HOWARD**: If we do not, we will fail to meet the demands of citizenship in a democratic polity and we will bequeath to our children and to our students no pathways to justice. I think Martin Luther King would've understood perfectly the stakes of Smith's work as a scholar and a teacher. I am very honored to introduce Professor Ian Smith, who is speaking tonight on “Making Blackness.”

**IAN SMITH**: Good evening, everyone. Lovely to see you all here. And thank you, Jean, for that very kind introduction. I'm happy to be here to deliver finally on the invitation [laugh]. It's been a three-year work in progress. And so thank you for coming. And I hope I'll be able to make it worth your while to be here today. So today I'm speaking on “Making Blackness.” And if you can't hear me, just wave at the back so I'll get a sense of whether I need to speak louder or not. Okay? Thank you.

**SMITH**: "Modernity," writes Achille Mbembe, "Is in reality just another name for the European project of unlimited expansion undertaken in the final years of the 18th century." Mbembe's formulation reminds us that "modernity" has been a shadow term for a series of geopolitical rearrangements stemming from the early 15th century. This early modern period saw the beginnings of European exploration, trade, commerce, and importantly, the African slave trade, that would evolve under the twin auspices of colonial possession and capital enrichment.

**SMITH**: Missing therefore from conventional definitions of modernity is the full recognition and impact of Atlantic slavery, a quote, "Turbulent movement of global magnitude, with varying modalities, tempos, and scales, marked by complex fluxes of peoples, goods, ideas, that solidified the prominence of blackness and race as modernity's critical components with consequential effects rooted in the fetishization of externality." For Mbembe, the term "black" was the product of a social and technological machine, tightly linked to the emergence and globalization of capitalism.

**SMITH**: It was invented to signify exclusion, brutalization, and degradation to point to a limit constantly conjured and abhorred. "The Black Man, despised and profoundly dishonored, is the only human in the modern order whose skin has been transformed into the form and spirit of merchandise, the living crypt of capital," end quote. This powerful evocation of eviscerated skin is further elucidated by the Enlightenment apologists for black slavery like Hume, Kant, and Jefferson.

**SMITH**: Who argued for the preeminence of reason, only to deny its very existence for blacks who they contend lack the feeling, intellectual capacity, and artistic skills that confer full humanity. And Kant claims, for example, that, "Among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who are transported elsewhere from their countries, although many of them have been set free, still not a single one was ever found who presented anything great in art or science or any other praise-worthy quality," end quote.

**SMITH**: Blacks exist within an epistemology of the skin on a plain of externality. While the body or skin as capital is cogently posited by Mbembe, I would also like to keep in view the Enlightenment's contribution to racial modernity that conceived of black persons as bereft of intelligence, denuded of humanity, and treated as hollowed out remnants of signifying skin, mere epidermal shells whose blackness was made to carry enormous cultural meaning.

**SMITH**: This for me is the organizing principle of early modern blackface. For modern audiences and readers, blackface has become narrowly associated with various cosmetic forms of painted skin. Minstrel shows beginning in the early 19th century America bequeathed the figure of a performer's white body lathered in grotesque shades of black as the actor cavorted on stage through a series of songs, dances, and comic business.

**SMITH**: Or in the case of 18th century Shakespearean performance, our collective memories are stamped with a description of the painted features of Spranger Barry, John Philip Kemble, and Edmund Kean in the role of Othello, the Moor, and Hollywood's continued fascination with blackface into the 21st century has kept the painted look before our eyes. Thus, blackface colored by ideas of painted skin limits the language of available theatrical technologies and shrouds from view alternate practices that lie outside the realm of cosmetic application.

**SMITH**: The early modern English performance tradition admits a different set of practices and blackface technologies that involve employing textiles and materials over the performer's body that imitate and stand in for black skin. We might be expected to characterize blackface as a misnomer for the early modern theater practice, especially since it has become so grounded in 19th century discourses of slavery, race, and propaganda.

**SMITH**: However, if blackface, that is "black face," if by blackface we mean denotatively the theatrical reproduction of black skin and synecdochally the face for the body, then the early modern use of fabrics and textiles to simulate skin falls within the compass of meaning. This iteration of early modern blackface prosthetic skin stands apart from cosmetic coloring.

**SMITH**: Since it enacts the creation of a substitute imitative skin as a separate entity that foregrounds an epidermal obsession with blackness and makes visible the cultural investment and the fetishization of exteriority and externality. Blackface fixes upon the skin as an all-consuming surface and metaphorizes the racist belief that black persons are to be judged by the fact and color of their skin and not the content of their intellect and character that is routinely presumed to be nonexistent.

**SMITH**: While early modern blackface has received more recent critical attention, I propose that the tangent to the meaning of the materials themselves offer rich research rewards. Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* provides an entry point into the investigation of the blackface materials that attained prominence in the

entertainment context of the royal courts and aristocratic households. This dazzling verbal duel of elite concerns, *Love's Labour's Lost* embodies what H.R. Woudhuysen, the Arden editor, describes as, quote, "Shakespeare's first extended and focused treatment in a comedy of life at court."

**SMITH**: And for John Michael Archer, the play represents, quote, "an excessively courtly and aristocratic entertainment." A distillation of European court life with its aristocratic amorous games unfolding amid royal entertainments, the play appears removed from questions of racial justice. It, quote, "has had an uneven critical reputation," Evelyn Tribble reminds us, "and has been viewed as deficient in plot and characterization."

**SMITH**: Still, the play was popular in its own time, and a revival was recommended by Burbage himself as likely to please Queen Anne, suggesting the subject's suitability and appeal for an aristocratic audience. Indeed, its main plot appears slim, involving the proposal of an all-male academy by the King of Navarre and three aristocratic friends that suffers a setback with the arrival of a foreign embassy led by the Princess of France and three female attendants.

**SMITH**: Only news of her father's death near the play's end requires the princess's immediate withdrawal. In the interim, banter among the four newly formed couples overwhelms the dramatic action, and the equally verbal comic crew of subplot figures reiterates the courtly life motif of erotic energy sublimated as linguistic excess. Staging revels in honor of the princess as head of the foreign embassy, targeting land negotiations between Navarre and France, the king and his friends extend the hospitality required for diplomacy.

**SMITH**: Historically, these kinds of entertainments covered a range of occasional celebrations, including coronations, births, marriages, religious holidays like Christmas, feast days like Twelfth Night, New Year's, and Shrovetide, and, as already indicated, diplomatic receptions. Scholars acknowledge that by the 16th century all courts of Europe were fully versed in the power of court performance as an instrument, however minor, of prestige, of diplomacy, of politics, sometimes even of government.

**SMITH**: "Then as now," writes Sarah Carpenter, "courtly entertainments could be dismissed as frivolous distractions from the serious business of the court," as in Francis Bacon's characterizations of them as, quote, "but toys to come among such serious observations." Modern scholarship has emphasized instead their political value, quote, "showing how apparently frivolous aspects of courtly entertainment such as costume, dance, chivalric sports, and gift exchange are powerful expressions of political ideologies, national identities, and cultural supremacy."

**SMITH**: To this scholarly consensus I would like to add for further exploration the kind of cultural supremacy that employs blackness and race in its articulations of power. The planning and execution of these court entertainments were a

collaborative venture, requiring an array of artists, poets, composers, painters, costume designers, and laborers, supervised and led by a court-appointed Master of the Revels, as he was named beginning in 1510.

**SMITH**: Notably, this supervisor, quote, "had financial, administrative, and aesthetic control of the revels subject to the approval of the …sovereign, and council." Shakespeare alludes to this administrative and artistic collaborative practice when the men under royal authority plan to woo and welcome the women, the king proposing, quote, "Let us devise some entertainment for them in their tents."

**SMITH**: Berowne adds to Shakespeare's direct invocation of the genre of courtly entertainments when he says, "We will with some strange pastimes solace the women, such as the shortness of the time can shape, for revels, dances, masks, and merry hours forerun fair love." Variety was the rule rather than the exception in court entertainments, and Berowne's …brief description of multiple entertainment possibilities is consistent with this principle, although the limited preparation time will constrain the scope.

**SMITH**: Equally notable, revels depended heavily on visual impact, not only in costuming, but also in pageants, scenic devices, masking headpieces, and other theatrical properties. While the court entertainments devised for the princess and her retinue are scaled down because of time constraints, they boast a recurring feature that adds to variety and delivers on visual impact, that is, the entry of black musicians whose performance leads off the festivities.

**SMITH**: To the modern reader and audience, the striking stage …direction might seem surprising. Quote, "Enter Blackamoors with music, the boy, Moth, with a speech, and the rest of the lords disguised." What are they doing here? W.R. Streitberger explains that from 1510 to 1605, Moors were popular characters in court revels. Kate Lowe explains additionally that Africans were often employed in the courts of Renaissance Europe for their musical skills, especially as drummers and trumpeters.

**SMITH**: I would argue that Shakespeare has prepared us for their entry. We recall that in the planning phase, Berowne, with the king's approval, reveals the king's, the governing concept, or subject of the revels in his telling phrase, "strange pastimes." The descripted "strange" is used in early modern English to suggest foreignness, alterity, and difference, and still retains that sense today. Jaquenetta, for example, speaks of "the strange queen's lords" and Holofernes refers to "the stranger queen's letter," both remarking on the foreign French princess.

**SMITH**: The term is artfully employed for the lords appearing disguised as Muscovites, prompting Rosaline's query, "What should be these strangers?" The strange pastimes then will not consist of an odd, unusual, or unfamiliar stage type or practice, not strange in that sense. Rather they reaffirm the notion of foreignness of racialized blackness, human difference, and its hypervisibility.

**SMITH**: Importantly, in Shakespeare's reconstruction of a European court setting, the evocation of musicians is as compelling as recognizing the genre of court entertainment and its contribution to the practice and means of making blackness. My approach to *Love's Labour's Lost* situates this moment of the black Moors' arrival as a doorway into performance history, of court revels and their fascination with inventing, manufacturing, and making facsimiles of black bodies.

**SMITH**: Like a detail from a dramatic canvas, this moment in Shakespeare's play can be used to shed light on the larger picture of theatrical practice and cultural frame. In 1547, the first year of the reign of Edward VI, an inventory is taken by Sir Thomas Cawarden, Knight Master of the King's Revels, and John Bernard Clark, controller of the same, of all such the king's masking garments.

**SMITH**: This kind of inventory is a regular feature of royal bookkeeping at the beginning of a reign. The 1547 inventory provides information, for example, about the clothing worn by black women. These are characters in a performance. Quote, "Two garments for Moors of gold and silver lawn," end quote. It also notes another set of costumes for eight women made of sumptuous textiles with vibrant colors that suggest the appeal to courtly display.

**SMITH**: In addition to establishing basic facts about the number of black characters in various performances, the inventory also tells another critical piece in the story of household management and recording costume, concept, design, and production from the previous reign. These costumes are textile remnants from an earlier date, in this instance, the reign of Henry VIII, who was notorious for his indulgence in entertainments and personal disguise.

**SMITH**: Importantly, for my purpose, this documentation confirms the continuity of practice and repetition of ideas about figuring blackness over time since Tudor inventories assess whether the extant materials that have been stored are still viable for reuse or whether they must be retired because of excessive wear and tear. The recycling of garments and clothing for new reconstruction creates a series of material traces, citations, and continuities within and across performances.

**SMITH**: As a result, we get a snapshot of recurring practices and tastes signaled by the reuse of garments that can be studied within the context of intertheatricality that foregrounds the mobilization of fabrics and movements of textiles as they acquire and deepen racial significance across multiple performance and contexts. Records from the royal household also provide data, not of costumes worn by black characters, but of the raw materials used in manufacturing the black body itself for entertainments.

**SMITH**: The King's Yeoman of the Robes, an officer of the chamber, procured materials from the Great Wardrobe, along with some external sources, for the monarch's garments worn throughout the year, including the garments worn for

ceremonies and revels.  In its capacity as supply organization to the household, its great store of cloth, furs, furniture, its staff of tailors, purveyors, and clerks, and its experience in purchasing, storing, delivering, and accounting for such material, the Great Wardrobe was the chief provider of material for ceremonies, spectacles, and revels.

**SMITH**:  The status conferred on the organizational enterprise of revels is observed, not only in the rank of persons appointed for oversight and their managerial skill in orchestrating a small army of craftsmen, but in the detailed records of materials and payments that survive among the chamber and privy purse accounts throughout the Tudor period.  For Shrovetide 1548, for example, in the second year of Edward VI's reign, four new masks are proposed, one for men, a second for young Moors, and two for women.

**SMITH**:  Several existing masking garments are translated, to use the historical parlance, that is, altered or remade into different costumes and recycled for the occasion, in addition to the expenditure for the new masks and their transportation multiple times from Blackfriars to London, all to the overall cost of 72 pounds, three schillings.  Recycling costumes from older masks was a familiar cost-effective practice, but the new device featuring young Moors gives it prominence at this juncture.

**SMITH**:  A letter sent to Sir Thomas Cawarden, the Master of the Revels, by Sir Michael Stanhope, reveals this mask's importance since the young Edward himself would perform as a Moor.  Stanhope requests with some urgency that the costumes for young Moors, quote, "and six other garments of like bigness for torchbearers be ready against Sunday next to the uttermost."  For a modern reader, the term "garments" might suggest clothing worn by a masker or performer that would be included in the category of theatrical costume.

**SMITH**:  However, the historical importance of these documents is that they allow us to understand the racial meaning of clothing and fabric as surpassing costume as a sign of cultural and geographical difference to grasp the extraordinary conceptual feat of mimicking black skin in lifeless cloth.  Payments are recorded to Richard Lee, London mercer, for supplying eight yards of black velvet, quote, "For gloves above the elbow for Moors," and for "labels for a base of one masking cloak" at ten schillings and sixpence a yard for a total of four pounds, nine schillings, and thruppence.

**SMITH**:  Black velvet signals the color imitation of the fabricated theatrical skin. The length of the gloves fitting above the elbows is intended to attempt total body coverage in tandem with costumes worn to effect an early modern racial proto-realism.  Charges also appear for payments to Lancelot Strong, the glover, for making eight pairs of long velvet gloves, quote, "for Moors," at a cost of ten pence a pair.

**SMITH**: An additional set of gloves, this time made of leather, is charged, quote, "For the like making of six pair of black leather gloves for torchbearers, taking eight pence for every pair so done" for a total cost of four schillings, and, quote, "For six goatskins for the same gloves price and piece" at ten pence for a total of five schillings. The crucial phrase "for the like making" of six pairs of black leather gloves indicates that torchbearers also appear as black Moors.

**SMITH**: With a difference that their stage skin is manufactured from the goatskins purchased and made into six pairs of leather gloves. The total number of black persons amount to fourteen in this newly mounted mask with eight young Moors and six black torchbearers. Since one of the main goals is to cover the extremities in this attempt at body construction, leggings were also required to complete the task.

**SMITH**: John Guy bought and supplied two dozen goatskins for the leggings, for which the records indicate repayments. For the delivery of the goatskins, the king's hosier, Hugh Easton, made fourteen pairs of black leather skins, quote, "for Moors." The mask presented two black imitation styles that support the notion of two different social types of black persons likely based on rank. The maskers, probably speaking, that included the young king wore velvet gloves covering their arms and leather leggings, while the torchbearers had leather covering their arms and legs.

**SMITH**: The texture of velvet, soft and piled for fullness, had a more luxurious tactile effect than goatskin. The torchbearers by contrast occupy a service role, suggesting a distinction in rank that reflects the ideology and culture of the English court and society. Animal skins connote a hairy rougher skin that contrasts with the smooth, warm texture of velvet. This mask also presents for further examination the role of torchbearers as black in other contexts and in later plays where torchbearers, the light playing delicately with corporal *chiaroscuro*, might have languished in racial anonymity now deserving new consideration.

**SMITH**: Nicholas Modena, identified as a stranger, received payment for trimming, coloring, and lining for sixteen visors or masks for Moors. We'll move to the face now. While visors could be made from leather as well as cloth fabric, the absence of a specific reference to leather might suggest that these were cloth visors that were trimmed to fit each wearer's face, dyed black, and lined for comfort against the performer's own skin. The account books also record an entry for payments to John Jordan, the skinner, for sixteen, quote, "caps made with course budge for Moors."

**SMITH**: Where budge is a, quote, "kind of fur consisting of lambskin with the wool dressed outwards." The commonplace use of wigs made of budge is meant to reconstruct the look and texture of black hair with materials like course lamb's wool. Like the visors, these would have been dyed for the racial consistency of having a black color. By contrast, the accounts from a later date record payments to Nicholas Garmin for wigs made of horsehair for men and other wigs presumably for women made of flax with notations of separate payments for workmanship and coloring.

**SMITH**: The unraced description indicates that the horsehair and flax are incorporated into wigs for white performers and stands in contrast to the distinctions made with the supposed coarseness of black hair. No detail is apparently too small in this early modern enterprise of fabricating the textile black body. William Hobson, the London haberdasher, supplied piecing thread in multiple colors for stitching and repairing old cloth to be reused in the costumes.

**SMITH**: A separate entry for a bundle of black thread would appear destined for sewing, among other materials, the newly purchased black materials for Moors. The documentation of thread is a detail of expenditure required of the royal bureaucracy. It also tells another story about the urge to make a black body from an assortment of textiles and turn them into a fabricated unit. The textile body parts, arms, legs, face, hair, are purchased, cut, trimmed, dyed, and individually fashioned by the craftsman's skill and thread in the royal atelier.

**SMITH**: But they are also sutured together in this theatrical practice of making blackness that produces an aesthetic and conceptual whole that is integral to our understanding of modernity. The manufacture of blackness through the court and aristocratic tradition highlights the conception of the black body as an inert set of materials, a foreboding image of a textile carcass, one might say, that is only functional at the performative will of the white actor and the pleasure of the state.

**SMITH**: Separate from the actor's body, this artfully conceived and constructed bundle of cloth and animal skin remains simply a thing among other things, especially evident in the artisanal context of production where black velvet and dyed budge rest alongside colored satins and brocade, not inherently different, but aggregated among a debilitating horizontality of things.

**SMITH**: The materiality of the elements forces us to confront a legacy in motion where black bodies are not human but relegated to the metaphoric vicissitudes of the royal wardrobe and workshop, purchased, used, overworked, worn out, and eventually discarded. I am of course deliberately calling attention to the affiliation between the performative black body within the court entertainment system and the black body in the wider early modern world and beyond, conscripted into servitude and slavery.

**SMITH**: Perhaps therefore it is not entirely fortuitous that the account records' most routine, yet sobering feature, is the detailed pricing and cost of every item. To Lancelot Strong, glover, for the making of eight pairs of long velvet gloves for Moors, taking ten pence for every pair so done, six schillings and eight pence, and to John Jordan, skinner, for sixteen caps made with course budge for Moors at eight pence apiece, and so on.

**SMITH**: Read from a contemporary perspective, this pricing of blackness is layered with the full weight of historical irony and tragedy, for indeed, black life was not

only given a price as the cost of bodies were negotiated and sold on slave markets. But today, black bodies like the textile materials are constantly in danger of being rendered worthless, not priceless, for the constant assaults, murders, and injustices that attend 21st century life in the United States.

**SMITH**: The global colonial project begun in the 15th century posited a historical frame within which an assemblage of persons, events, happenings, practices, narratives, and figurations formed the component parts of one long complex story about the evolution and epistemology of blackness in the West. The early modern theater made its own contribution to this historical assemblage so that at the distance of 400 years its institutional significance to the story of blackness can still be properly accorded and the specific practice of blackface can be usefully and appropriately assessed.

**SMITH**: Unlike the all-male exclusive academy, foolishly championed by the intellectual and cultural leisures in *Love's Labour's Lost*, our charge in this era of backlash, legislative attack, and corrosive intellectual conditioning, and outright violence, must be the continued commitment to the work of racial literacy. We must continue to build an academy that addresses our historical realities as we find remedies in education's reparative role in saving our democracy. Thank you.