

"Othello Was My Grandfather": Shakespeare in the African Diaspora

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Thank you, Mike. And I want to start with a round of thanks—first, to Mike Witmore and the Folger for inviting me and to Owen, Elyse, and Kathleen for arranging my visit. When offering a prayer, my father's mother would always ask for blessings for "the family and our family connections." And I'm really fortunate today that I have old friends here from Georgetown, from my many communities from when I was in DC, from Barnard. And I have my blood family here, but also a lot of family connections, people who are family by love. And some of them came from quite a distance, from North Carolina and New York, and I feel more than I can say, without losing my composure entirely, just so you know that I love you all, and I really appreciate your being here, and all the support you've given me through the years, as I wandered in the strangeness of academia. My last thanks—and he's not here, because I didn't have myself together to try to contact him—to my high school Shakespeare teacher, Mr. Vernon Rey. I already had a love of Shakespeare when I went into the class. My cousin, also named Kim, she and I took the class together. He just inspired us to love Shakespeare even more, if that were even possible, and he's always been my model for humane pedagogy. So, it's, besides my family, a lot because of him that I'm here today.

So, I come to you tonight with a proposition that will seem obvious to some and perhaps needlessly contentious to others: People of color, but particularly Black people, are not free to love Shakespeare. Our relationship to Shakespeare is frequently managed—I dare say, policed—both by those who love him and those who see him as an agent of cultural dominion. To borrow from last week's dissent by Justice Sonia Sotomayor, I make this claim, "writing only for myself and drawing on my professional experiences." In these times, in the wake of the *Utah v. Strieff* decision that supports unchecked policing, most often applied to poor and people of color, in the rise of what Michelle Alexander has called *The New Jim Crow*, and in the specter of death that haunts our cultural spaces from churches to nightclubs, it would be understandable for anyone to ask: What does your free love of Shakespeare even matter? Why care about the suspicion that greets Blackness in the world of Shakespeare when people of color, every day, walk out of their homes in this so-called free country to face suspicion and potential violence?

I hope in the next 40 minutes to demonstrate Shakespeare's role in racial formation in this country and the resultingly profound relationship between Shakespeare and Black freedom. I want to convince you that dismantling some of our long-held shibboleths about Shakespeare, being less suspicious of perceived challenges to Shakespeare, and forging a new relationship between Shakespeare and Blackness are essential to having a

Shakespeare usable for the next 400 years.

As you can tell from Mike's introduction, I spend most of my academic life in two worlds: the world of Renaissance and Shakespeare studies—to which certain values are attached: genius, universality, transcendence, and timelessness—and the world of Black cultural production—more associated with emotion, embodiment, particular forms of genius, no doubt, but also with trouble and disruption. Thus, for over 20 years, I have lived in the heart of canonical knowledge in the United States and at its most influential margins. I see almost daily the complicated differences between the authority allowed and denied to people of color, even over our own experiences, and the authority and value attributed to "white" cultural artifacts, often without scrutiny.

I began my career across town at Georgetown University, during an early phase of what we used to call "the culture wars"—I guess we still call it that—when many scholars concerned with race, Shakespeare, and cultural politics pushed the academy to question what forms of exclusion scholars enact when they insist on a transcendent, ahistorical Shakespeare, who is, in the words of my colleague Peter Erickson, a "universal" "fixed, unchanging point" that was untouchable and unquestioned. This Shakespeare was seen as needing protection—particularly from the disruptive, hard questions that a politically conscious Blackness presses on dominant culture and the accompanying insistence that the lives of people of color be given a place in the American classroom. In the face of actual wars, in the ongoing dismantling of education and the arts, the culture wars have subsided into random skirmishes; however, the divergent values between Shakespeare and Blackness linger.

Most of the time, I just live in these contradictions. I move between the amiably fraught world of Shakespeare studies and the world of African diaspora studies. However, in these urgent times, the question of freedom that propels all of us in Black studies has made me reverse course. My previous work was deeply historical in the 16th and 17th centuries. One might say it was a Shakespeare-driven approach that researched how questions of race mattered in Shakespeare's day. And I'm moving from that to a more diasporic focus, which is to locate Shakespeare in how Black writers theorize and represent race. While I was writing my first volume on *Othello* that Mike mentioned, I began thinking more specifically about how the relationship between Shakespeare and the Black and brown people who perform, enjoy, grapple, and rewrite him is continually vexed.

This project seeks to use *Othello* to recover Black experiences of Shakespeare and to explore contemporary questions of race. The difficulties faced by those of us who call ourselves Black Shakespeareans—whether in the world of performance or the worlds of scholarship—are also the difficulties of race relations in the United States. *Othello* has a particular relationship to African American history and the diaspora. These texts range from poetry to drama to visual arts, comedy, and philosophy, and they all attest to *Othello*'s hold on Black culture. As the 1995 play *The Moor's Fortune* proclaims, "We

have wallowed in the ocean of Othello's legacy."

I'm going to offer you three examples of encounters between Shakespeare and race from the 18th to the 21st century that I've been mulling over for this project. And I should say—or I was told I shouldn't say it, but I'm going to say—that this is a very new project, so these are kind of my first thinkings about this. Although, obviously, I've been thinking about Othello for a long time. So, the initial evidence suggests that my own experiences have many precedents: much in this combined history of Blackness and Shakespeare makes claiming three things at once—a Black identity, a desire for freedom, and an appreciation of Shakespeare's plays—a more formidable task than you might imagine. Because of the lack of archival materials, much of my first two examples is, in fact, unknowable. But all three are part of a larger story of race in America that will be written by the institutions here on Capitol Hill, including the Folger, but also in our daily encounters with the state and with each other. So, before I get to my examples, I want to lay down some principles.

Coming to you from my two worlds, I can't mark this quadricentennial celebration, our celebration of 400 years of the "Wonder of Will," without thinking about the 400 years of Black history with which he is deeply intertwined. In these 400 years—albeit in fits and starts—Shakespeare has grown in value as a cultural commodity, which is to say, he remains a way to identify other objects of value. For example, in order to convey the personal presence and stature of Pulitzer Prize winner Toni Morrison, the *New York Times* notes, "Morrison wears her age like an Elizabethan regent or a descendent of Othello via Lorain, Ohio." The paper strains to imagine her as somehow "related" to Shakespeare, even if it's only through a character, who is, I should say, a *character*, and who famously had no children in that fictional life.

In those same 400 years, Black people dispersed from Africa to the New World also became a source of value, but as literal commodities brought in chains to different sites of the New World and as the ideological property—our Blackness used, particularly on the stage, as the means by which "masses of Americans could establish a positive and superior sense of identity." Like Othello, we "have done the state some service." In that dual history, the universal Shakespeare has served the same purpose, at some points, as many representations of Black people—to maintain a sense of mastery and superiority of one group over another.

Early in *Othello*, the villain Iago describes himself, using the enigmatic phrase, "I am not what I am." Frequently in popular arenas, Shakespeare is not who he is. When you hear the word "Shakespeare," it might mean several things, and I've broken this down into four elements:

- One, the historical person, a playwright and entrepreneur who drew upon the energies of his day and the newly hatching theatrical culture of Elizabethan England to create incredible plays
- Two, the texts that come to us from that era that were the product of

- Shakespeare's energetic collaborations and competition with his fellow writers and actors
- Three, the accumulated baggage of 400 years of cultural conversation and scholarship that trains us—in ways subtle and not—how to think and speak about Shakespeare
  - And four—and thankfully, I see less of this as years go on, but it's still there—Shakespeare as a metaphor for Englishness or white European culture

The first two Shakespeares are quirky, brilliant, boisterous, ribald, and beautiful. The last two are to be spoken of in hushed tones, as if the stage was a cathedral (rather than an entertainment space on the fringes of London, often shared with bear-baiting) and his text *Holy Writ*. In this latter sense, performing Shakespeare can be "an empowering point of entry" into theater and American society more generally. However, as scholar Ania Loomba notes, laying claim to this Shakespeare can also "reinforce the authority of dominant culture." It can stabilize and assert the power and value of whiteness, rather than allowing the space for new formations.

Whenever you hear the phrase "Black/Shakespeare"—and you're going to be sick of hearing it by the end of the thing, I apologize—I want you to see it like this. Imagine that space between "Black" and "Shakespeare" as that 400 years of history that largely denied Blacks access to the structures—particularly education and the stage—that generally shape relations to Shakespeare. The slash represents that wounded past and that division—what W.E.B. Du Bois famously called "the color line," which he identified as "the problem of the Twentieth Century," and which continues into the 21st century, despite that brief honeymoon after Obama's first election, when folk were colorblind (laughter). While it has been a mainstay of American Shakespeare that appreciation of the Bard is the path to greater acceptance and participation in dominant culture, it turns out that the price of inclusion too often is a belief in a false universality based on Western ideals and an amnesia to our own history. Our relations to Shakespeare are both part of and represent a larger struggle for Black freedom—not the freedom to be included and tolerated in white institutions on *their* terms, but the freedom in a democracy to have institutions that nourish and represent the diversity of our society.

Unsurprisingly, Black writers often use Shakespeare to grapple with questions of authority and universality. Playwright Alice Childress, who did her television adaptation of *Othello* that was never actually filmed, unsparingly notes that many markers of value in the literary world are ways of upholding whiteness while devaluing Black experience. She says:

The Marketplace is white and there we are daily reminded that our writing is not considered universal. We are told that the 'best' is that subject matter applicable to the whites of the world.

For Black writers, especially those like Childress, who wanted to make the struggles and glory of everyday Black folk the subject of her art, "genius" and "universality" are

shorthand for exclusion. Black attention to 400 years of experience is dismissed as "too personal" and "too individual" or "too political" to move into any realm of genius. Childress notes that this is a one-sided conversation. Blacks are routinely expected to muster empathy for others, even if they lived 400 years ago, and yet are told that their own experiences are not relevant unless somehow taken out of historical context and made palatable to the uninformed.

In a more hopeful vein, W.E.B. Du Bois gives us a vision of Black intellectual life beyond what he called "the veil of double consciousness":

I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. [And it's not gilded here, but I'm getting the sense of what he was talking about.] From out the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they all come graciously with no scorn or condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the Veil.

In that now famous phrase, "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not," Du Bois offers a powerful vision of the future—a vision in which educated Blacks and the writers who embody our rich cultural heritage mingle on equal footing and without restraint, blending in with the long-acknowledged arbiters of history, philosophy, and literature. "Shakespeare's wince"—a metaphor for the ways in which Shakespeare and Anglo-American culture have been used to belittle and stifle Black creativity—is replaced with quiet acceptance.

No Shakespeare play embodies Black struggles over authority and inclusion more than *Othello*. In Act 1, the play draws from a comic structure—and this is a really potted synopsis of it, I'm sorry. A Black general, seemingly accepted into Venetian society, elopes with Desdemona, the white daughter of a Venetian senator. However, after the marriage is approved by the Venetian duke, and the lovers move to the battlegrounds of Cyprus, the play becomes fully tragic. Othello's love is stimulated into jealousy and murderous rage by Iago, a soldier passed over by promotion. The play ends when Othello murders his wife, and then himself, asking:

Othello: Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,  
Nor set down aught in malice. Then you must speak  
Of one that loved not wisely, but too well  
(*Othello*, 5:2:402–404)

The story itself is a wide lens for interrogating racial belonging, desire, gender, sexuality, and power.

The play seemingly offers Black people a place of entry—who better than Black Americans to understand the constant sense of judgment, the suspicion that accompanies being an outsider? Who better to feel the story of a man with a singular

relationship to the state, whose gifts of eloquence let him temporarily cross the boundaries of an insular world? His desire to have his unmediated story, to have others, in his words, “speak of me as I am” in the aftermath of tragedy, is a paradoxically powerful cry for peoples who are too often spoken for, and about, by others.

However, this sense of kinship and understanding is complicated, both because of the story and the play’s stage history. The Othello of Act 1 is noble and eloquent, but he’s also, in my eyes, painfully naïve. And, of course, he murders an innocent woman. So, what are we supposed to do with that? But most important, to talk about the stage history of *Othello* is to talk about the staging of Blackness. And just... oh, I should have started out with this. For the purposes of any discussion you have with me, Shakespeare is Black—I mean, oh, yeah, that, too! (laughter) But Othello’s Black. Othello is Black. And so, you know, to talk about the staging of Blackness and the right of Blacks to be on the stage, the first documented performances of any kind in the New World by transplanted Africans were part of the co-optation of Black music and movement to shape African bodies for plantations. America’s best-known contribution to popular performance stage history is blackface minstrelsy, where, as Errol Hill notes, whites were trained to see Blackness only as a source of ridicule. To claim or to reject Othello is to immerse oneself into a history of race and Black stigmatization.

### **Othello Burghardt**

So my first example is Othello Burghardt. "Othello was my grandfather." I drew my title and inspiration from this W.E.B. Du Bois quote because genealogy is a key means by which African American theorists explain the workings of race in the United States. And Du Bois’s family suggests the complicated ways in which Blacks inhabit "Othello," both the play and the man. In his *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*, he reminds the reader that it is not his white ancestors, who he says were quite lost, and indeed unknown, but the Black Burghardts who set the parameters of his American existence. "I was brought up with the Burghardt clan and this fact determined largely my life and 'race.'"

Du Bois’s family tree suggests that a century before he struggled with theorizing American racialism, his ancestors had their own encounters with Shakespeare and a complicated picture emerges. Othello was a name given mockingly to the "properties" of slave society. Here, for example, is a partial list of slaving voyages by a ship, *Othello*. Jill Lepore’s *New York Burning* places an enslaved man named Othello at the center of the New York conspiracy of 1741 (also known as the “Negro Plot”). A series of arsons in lower Manhattan—probably, actually, by a mixed group of enslaved Blacks and lower class whites—led to rumors of a citywide attempt to burn the colony and kill all the white inhabitants. Governing authorities resorted to a massive interrogation of enslaved men, at the time, in its virulence, equated to the Salem witch trials by contemporaries in other colonies. The Othello of this story might also have been the six-year-old "Negro boy" Othello, auctioned off from New York Governor John Montgomerie’s estate. And I

should add here that this boy, the six-year-old boy, Othello, is listed in the same property inventory as Montgomerie's copy of *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. Despite unreliable evidence of his involvement and the testimony to his good character, this Othello's pardon, which was requested by his powerful master—so, almost all the masters asked for pardon, because to hang an enslaved man is to actually kill off a valuable piece of property, and he was a skilled man—was refused. Instead, his sentence was "reduced" to hanging rather than burning at the stake. On July 18, 1741, he was executed—along with 33 other Black men and four white women and men, who were burned or hung.

It is not surprising to find an Othello amongst the ranks of enslaved Black men. "Elevated," grandiose-sounding names from literature and classical history, like Cato, Pompey, and Caesar, were a recurring joke for slaveholders, a way of reinforcing white mastery literally every time they addressed an enslaved man. However, this history, and Othello the character's paradoxical status within it, makes Othello a strange choice, at least to me, for free people, especially for the Burghardts, who paid careful attention to family names and family history. Du Bois's great grandmother reputedly refused to take her husband's slave name in favor of her own chosen name, "Freeman."

So, what does this name mean for them? And, again, I can't know, so this is speculation. On the one hand, the name, Othello, might indelibly mark the twoness of their experience, that dilemma of being Black in a white world. It could mark the family's liminal place in the New World. On the other hand, the name might claim the family's sense of centrality in the story of Western culture. Othello moves from being fictive to actual kin, Black property through kinship, not slavery.

And there is a third possibility that I hope to research more, going forward. Living in neighboring Massachusetts, it is very likely that Othello's father, a former slave, Tom Burghardt, knew the story of the New York conspiracy and the wronged Othello better than he knew the actual play *Othello*. And it feels that Du Bois is making—he's a very careful writer—that he's making a historical fact of his grandfather's name a sign to readers. And it's a sign, and I'm working on this, of the complicated legacies of Blackness in the US, and an acknowledgment that race shapes your birth and circumstances in America, and that grappling with our, what he called "lost and indeed unknown history" is a necessary task for American survival.

### **Henrietta Vinton Davis**

So, this example is not really related to Othello, and I'm not even going to apologize for it, because I can't claim to be a Black Shakespearean here at the Folger and not bring up actress and activist Henrietta Vinton Davis. I know people in DC and Baltimore were key, particularly in the 2000s, in covering her accomplishments, getting Henrietta Vinton Davis Day declared, getting a grave marker for her, and so, there might be people in the audience who actually know more about it than I do. So, I'm going to beg your

indulgence for a minute. But you'll see why I feel so compelled to think about her. Like me, Davis was a Black Shakespearean. Like me, she was born in Baltimore and raised in a household of political engagement. As a young woman, she was a teacher, and I presume that, like me, she grew up with a very early love of Shakespeare.

But sadly, for me, that's where the resemblance ends. Davis was an extraordinarily gifted performer with a deep voice, a prodigious memory, and enormous charisma. Yeah, so, I have other things! (laughter) She's considered to be the first professional Black woman Shakespearean actress. She was seemingly driven to inhabit the stage. I suspect she would have been thrilled, rather than slightly terrified, as I was, at the invitation to come here tonight. She lurks in the deeper corners of my mind because her distinct careers as a Shakespearean actress and a political organizer and her ability to thrive only in both, demonstrates so clearly this kind of ongoing problem.

On April 25, 1883, Frederick Douglass, the abolitionist, suffragist, and champion of Davis's stage career, introduced her first public recital before a mixed audience, not far from here, at the Marini Hall, then located at 9th and E Streets, NW. Like many "readers" or elocutionists, her performance was not a full-fledged play, but selected speeches. That night, she was Juliet from *Romeo and Juliet* and Portia from *The Merchant of Venice*. A local Black newspaper, *The Washington Bee*, reported that Davis "wrapped the whole audience so close to her that she became queen of the stage in their eyes." In an era when acting on a public stage was still a suspect activity for women generally, and when Black stage performance was often mocked and ridiculed by white competitors and reviewers, Davis went on to become a noted elocutionist and, eventually, a stage celebrity whose very name would draw crowds.

Davis's tendency to portray empowered female characters, including those who challenged various forms of discrimination, underscored with each performance the boundaries she was breaking simply by pursuing her chosen career. Thomas Robson notes that she was likely "the first Black woman to ever play the role [of Cleopatra], professionally, in the United States, if not in the entire world." Like many Black women of her time, she "made a way out of no way," performing at rented halls, schools, and churches.

However, as Errol Hill outlines, Davis's career ultimately stalled because "legitimate theater companies, then exclusively under white management," would not accept her despite her talent and her audience. Indeed, reading through some of the notices of her career in Black newspapers, they are often juxtaposed; the kind of praise or critique of her performance is often juxtaposed with laments about the absence of spaces where Black artists could perform with dignity. In response to a published suggestion that Davis start her own theater company, an 1884 review makes it clear that white audiences at the time would have found the "idea of a troop of Shakespearean actors of various shades of black . . . highly ludicrous." She did, nonetheless, go on to found her own theater company, which, as far as we can tell, did not last long. And there's more to be



told about that.

But after 30 continuous years as an actress, and sometime between first meeting him in 1913 and 1919, Davis joined Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, also known as the UNIA. This is a Black nationalist organization that promoted Black self-determination and the affirmation of Black worth. By the 1920s, it was the largest mass political movement in the US, with branches throughout North America, Central America, and the Caribbean. Using the commanding presence that once thrilled theatergoers with renditions of Shakespeare, she rose to prominence as a fundraiser and organizer for the UNIA. She largely left behind the professional stage and Shakespeare performance, turning instead to reciting the works of Paul Laurence Dunbar to energize enthusiastic Garveyites. Her early career as a Shakespearean and actress largely disappeared until the 1980s.

It is difficult to know how Vinton viewed her move from Shakespeare to Dunbar, Douglass to Garvey. Robson suggests that we should read her performances as "resistive political acts"; however, he argues that Davis's trajectory represents a movement forward from a more accommodationist form of racial uplift (represented in her Shakespeare career and her work with Frederick Douglass) to a more fully formed Black political consciousness. So you won't be surprised to know that I'm tending to follow Errol Hill here to suggest that her politics weighed equally in both arenas. And Hill suggests that, denied the necessary space to perform Shakespeare and other classic works, Vinton joined an organization that would help build the conceptual and physical spaces for future Black artists.

We don't know what pride Henrietta Vinton felt in her many firsts, or whether she left Shakespeare performance with regret or anger. We don't know if she continued to read Shakespeare and perform Shakespeare privately, as sometimes happened at the time. And most importantly, we don't know whether she left intending to return. Called a "Living Genius" by the Black press, this genius was clearly seen as a threat to the Shakespeareans in the legitimate stage.

### ***American Moor***

So, you know, we don't know much about Henrietta Vinton Davis. But, if you're fortunate, you can see Keith Hamilton Cobb's *American Moor*. And I just want to say here, that part of this change for me in the work is that I'm used to working with people who really—who are dead, you know, to be honest. And this idea of writing about and talking about live people, particularly when they're sitting in the audience right there, is quite terrifying. So, Keith, I don't know! We'll give you a chance for rebuttal or whatever, you know.

So, this spring at the Folger, I wasn't there, but I'm trusting to Mike that it was with the appropriate "pomp, triumph, and reveling," the *American Moor* was inducted into the

Folger. I want to conclude with a discussion of this play, and why this public acquisition is an important step for the Folger and for Black Shakespeare. *American Moor* is a searingly honest, deeply humane, theatrical biography told through the actor's experience of first discovering a love of Shakespeare and finding that, as an African American male, *Othello* is an elusive inheritance—something he is expected to carry continually, even if he can never really own it. Like many Black appropriations of *Othello*, it does the dual work of engaging or performing the Shakespeare text, or a range of Shakespeare text, but also making visible the structures of whiteness that exclude them.

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

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

We enter the theater watching Hamilton stand in the corner of an almost empty stage with a copy of *Othello*. When the performance "opens," he moves center stage to tell us "the story of my life" through his blossoming love of Shakespeare, a love he maintains while navigating the theater's and America's assumptions about Blackness that drive Black actors into an endless stream of stereotypical roles. The policing of his place in the Shakespeare world begins early, when in acting class he elects to perform Titania's "forgeries of jealousy" speech. In response, he is told in an agonizing, indirect fashion, that he should perform something he's more right for—Aaron, Morocco, or Othello—you know, the Black roles. Cobb first rejects Othello outright, seeking spaces where he can display the magic of his craft and of Shakespeare's language, but he is again and again "given" Othello. And one line is, "While the play's relevance was urged . . . perpetually." The play gives Cobb the space to perform these denied opportunities. The actor is the ultimate code switcher, nimbly moving from Shakespeare's most eloquent verse—Titania, Richard II, and Hamlet make an appearance—to the multiple accents of New York City.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The actor's response to the slings and arrows of outrageous microaggressions—some of you all have been on a campus!—is a Fanonian desire for authentic communication, indeed, communion, but here, using a mutual love of Shakespeare to break down false assumptions about race and Blackness. The actor seems to say, "If I am Othello, then let me tell you who Othello is and who I am. We can figure out this play (and the predicament of race) if you would only talk to me." The play ends on either an uncertain or hopeful note. The audience has been swayed, but has the director?

*American Moor* gives Cobb his own space to draw from a full range of Shakespeare to move and delight audiences (and then we can see this as a tradition that includes Henrietta Davis) and a much-needed space for discussion of race. His talkbacks with

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

To perform Shakespeare and to read or study Shakespeare should not feel like crossing the color line. For that to happen, for people to love and enjoy Shakespeare freely, he needs to be freed from being white property. So, too, Black distrust of Shakespeare and Othello cannot be dismissed. It has to be accepted as the understandable product of that same 400 years that brought Shakespeare's greatness. I encourage all of you to recognize how cavalierly we throw around Shakespeare's universality and how universality reinforces whiteness. In Alice Childress's carefully chosen words, this insistence on the universal "places shackles on a writer's pen."

And to give up Shakespeare as a metaphor for the greatness of Western culture feels impossible. And, you know, since we've been trying to do it for 20 years, it really feels impossible. And it feels as if it might undermine the very institution that brings us all together today: that universality is a self-perpetuating engine, and, even in these fraught times, it can direct money and access to arts, to underperforming schools, to parks, and to prisons. And that's a hard thing to give up. And so, this means that to "save" Shakespeare for the next 400 years, we have to save the arts in America more broadly, reaffirming its value in our schools and public life and as essential to the goals of diversity and inclusion in that life. Instead of browbeating teachers who don't see Shakespeare as relevant to their students, we need to give them the means to have students experience the stage and to have a sense of play in relationship to the Shakespearean text.

I hope the Black artists in my studies can offer a different path, which is to go back to that quirky, brilliant, boisterous, ribald, and beautiful Shakespeare and the lively theatrical culture from which he emerged. We need to keep creating for students and audiences "local" Shakespeares—a Shakespeare that is local to his own time and also local to the concerns of the audience. And I understand *District Merchants* is doing

exactly that.

Promoters—and this is a little historical note—promoters of what was known as the "New Negro" movement of the 1930s thought it important to find a "Black Shakespeare"—a genius who would transform vernacular Black life into an enduring art. They knew that Shakespeare was someone who elevated his native language—English—at a time when Latin was the sign of literacy and culture. In wanting a "Black Shakespeare," they did not want someone who transcended race, but they wanted that rare person who could similarly transform into art the cadences of Black life and the multi-vocality of American speech.

In this sense, local Shakespeare might mean seeing the striking resonances between Shakespeare theatrical culture and Black life. In Black culture, we find appreciation of performance, of musicality, of cultural style, of language and wordplay as rich as Shakespeare's own.

In bringing *American Moor* and, I hope, future Black works and experiences into the Folger, we are bringing what scholar Francesca Royster calls "Shakespeare with a difference". A Shakespeare that speaks to and includes those who yearn for freedom, including the freedom to love Shakespeare, as we like it—and the freedom to wince at Shakespeare, when we need to. It is not our access to Shakespeare that marks our freedom. It is our ability to inhabit a new Shakespeare in our own terms, to offer him our love, but with our difference.

Thank you.