White Angst Meets Othello – Casting Conundrums

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ABSTRACT

I offer this piece as a cautionary tale to a journal committed to exploring creativity in contemporary research and teaching and the interface between them, promoting praxis in creative education and building evidence-based bridges between arts and artistic practice. It forewarns race-conscious feminist arts educators and practitioners that things can go awry if potential collaborators are not as deeply embedded in critical race feminist scholarship. More specifically, it is a story about what can happen when a white feminist devises an antiracist feminist project, taking the lead from eminent black scholar bell hooks, amongst others, who have called for a criterial examination of whiteness (hooks, 1990; hooks 1997). Be wary, it warns, about engaging a white crusader intent on proving his anti-racism credentials at the expense of a considered engagement with such a project.

This article responds to the charge that the casting decisions for my play, Othello on Trial - specifically, the casting of a white man in the role of Othello, the defendant, is tantamount to "whitewashing". It outlines the research basis for this casting decision, namely, my own criminological studies of English courts' handling of intimate partner femicide cases, critical race studies and critical race Shakespeare scholarship.

Keywords: whiteness, Othello, black, race, theatre, drama educations

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INTRODUCTION

White angst has bedevilled my play, *Othello on Trial (or the Tragedy of Desdemona, the Wife)* from the start. First up, a feminist criminologist, assuming the project would involve a white woman putting a black Othello on trial for wife-murder, scoffed "that's a good look", not giving me time to explain that this Othello, the defendant, was a white man. Another academic, this one in theatre and performance studies, announced that she wouldn't touch a play with a white Othello because, as she presumed, it would put a black actor out of work. On the contrary, I assured her, the play requires a black or ethnic minority actor to play Shakespeare's Othello in the Prologue before transitioning into the role of one of the lawyers in the Act 1 trial at the Old Bailey. More was to come. University students rehearsing the play in London reported feeling "squeamish" repeating lines from Shakespeare's *Othello* that were included in my script. Emilia defending Desdemona as "the more angel she" and Othello as "the blacker devil" and her "most filthy bargain" was bad enough. As for the lines Shakespeare gave to Othello for his final speech, besmirching himself as a "malignant" and turbanned Turk", a "base Indian" — or was it a "base Judean"? — whichever, they were base and all too much for students so woke they felt authorised to censor Shakespeare's text and, of course, my play's script (Howe, 2016). The focus of this article, however, is the most recent furore over the play — an eruption of white angst that almost derailed a planned reading at an international conference.

The players in this episode will remain anonymous. "What matters who's speaking", Beckett asked and Foucault, of course, concurred (Foucault, 1977, p. 115). Really, what matter who's speaking? All we need note is that with one exception – that of a black university student wanting to play the role of the defendant in my play *as* Shakespeare's "noble Moor" — objections to the conceit of a modern-day white Othello charged with wife-murder have been raised by white folk. I hasten to say that the kind of white angst that concerns me here is not the overtly racist white supremacist kind that blames non-white peoples for all the problems befalling white folk, the kind that might help get Trump re-elected. It is rather the heightened anxiety of the hyper race conscious white liberal humanist subject who, consumed with "sensitivity" about racism and self-flagellating guilt about his or her own white privilege, stages a self-righteous knee-jerk reaction against any political endeavour raising race questions deemed to be un-PC, un-woke. Even expressly anti-racist projects like my play can get waylaid by those white liberals in thrall to their own self-important anti-racism consciousness. *Othello*, sometimes called his black play, especially troubles the white angst brigade. None of his other plays, it is said, invokes "such pained and/or recriminatory audience/reader response" (Kolin, 2002: 1). No wonder my casting of a white man to play Shakespeare's famous Moor *as* a white man makes hyperconscious white liberals nervous, driving some to believe it is tantamount to whitewashing or, less dramatically, to offer tokenistic recuperative strategies – perhaps best to enlist a woman of colour as director?

As a white feminist who has engaged for many years with postcolonial, developing nations, black feminist, and critical race scholarship, I joined the throng of scrutineers checking the politics of white voice and sometimes paid the price for doing so (Howe, 1995; Howe, 2009). This time however, it was my work that had fallen foul of hyper race conscious surveillance rules. How that work holds up against allegations of "white-washing" is for readers of the following rationale for my casting decisions to determine.

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feminist arts educators and practitioners that things can go awry if potential collaborators are not as deeply embedded in critical race feminist scholarship. More specifically, it is a story about what can happen when a white feminist devises an antiracist feminist project, taking the lead from eminent black scholar bell hooks, amongst others, who have called for a criterial examination of whiteness (hooks, 1990; hooks 1997). Be wary, it warns, about engaging a white crusader intent on proving his anti-racism credentials at the expense of a considered engagement with such a project.

THE EPISODE

In 2019 the organisers of an international conference accepted my proposal for a paper on the impact of feminist-led law reforms on outcomes in intimate partner femicide cases. As the conference was to be held at a theatre venue, I enquired whether there might be room in the program for a reading of *Othello on Trial*. The organisers agreed, scheduling a reading by students at the host university for lunchtime on the first day. As the conference drew near, I sent the script to the academic organising the reading. I also sent him an article about one of the London performances that explained why the role of the defendant Othello was played by a white male actor, thereby inadvertently setting in train the whole sorry episode.

He responded that he was withdrawing from the proposed reading. Furthermore, he refused to "recommend or compel" the proposed student cast, 'a diverse group' that had been "addressing issues of racial privilege and inequality throughout history and performance', to take part in what he called my "whitewashing of Othello". Thinking he had misunderstood the rationale for that casting decision, I referred him to my explanatory article that recounted the play's highly favourable reception by East London secondary students, most of whom were black and Muslim. None of the over 200 students who returned questionnaires at those performances expressed any objection to a white Othello, some appreciating and commending this challenge to the negative stereotyping of black men (Howe, 2015). I pointed out too that my project was informed by critical race scholarship problematising whiteness as a privileged, largely unexamined race. As such were the exact opposite of the "whitewashing" he accused me of.

It was all to no avail. My explanations were dismissed as 'lecturing', the favourable receptions of the play as "hearsay". Having, he said, spent weeks "exploring violence against murdered and missing indigenous women" with his students, he refused to let them read my script. He had 'a duty to maintain a vigilant resolve in the face of what he saw as a "problematic" representation of race that rendered it invisible. Moreover, "such whitewashing in the theatre" had been "dealt with before". He provided four examples. Three were productions cancelled on the ground of cultural insensitivity and appropriation. One was a play about race relations that had no indigenous actors. Another was a show featuring a predominantly white cast singing songs composed by black slaves. The third was a production of *Othello* cancelled after protests at the casting of a white woman as Othello. And finally, believing I had little understanding of "the extent of large scale indigenous racial injustice", he referred me to a case in which a white jury had exonerated a white man who had killed an indigenous man. He concluded by advising that he had explored plays that "challenge violence, homophobia, sexism and racism by far better playwrights and empathic theorists than you". All this he was quite prepared to state openly should the need arise.

His reaction placed the conference organisers in a dilemma. Believing he had "a point" (never clarified), they scrambled to find a solution. It was to hold a reading by women conference delegates that would highlight the play's 'feminist aspects', presumably its focus on wife-killing. The new timeslot was the conference's final parallel session. Last minute scheduling against three conference sessions meant that attendance was small. The performance was prefaced by a talk a conference organiser titled 'Deplorable Shakespeare' to capture her discomfort with what were for her his "problem" plays, *The Merchant of Venice, Taming of the Shrew* and, of course, *Othello*. Referring briefly to the cancelled student reading, she claimed the students themselves had refused to participate.

Before proceeding to a defence of my modern-day white Othello wife-killer, a fact check is in order. First, the students did not refuse to participate. They were never given that opportunity, the decision to withdraw from the project the theatre directors alone. Second, the cases my critic deemed relevant to rejecting my play did not do the explanatory work he imagined they would. None were on point. None focused on a wife-killer. And in any event, far from whitewashing an entire cast, *Othello on Trial* has a rationale for having a white man take the role of Othello, the wife-killer. That rationale is to render whiteness visible as a race and to problematise racialised othering practices in relation to violence against women. Again, far from replacing minority actors with white ones, the play — with the exception of one all black school-girl cast — has always been performed with a racially mixed cast. Moreover, it requires a black actor to take the lead role of prosecutor in the modern-day trial drama. As for the cancelled productions of *Othello*, we shall see that one leading black critical race Shakespeare scholar had no objection to casting a white woman as Othello in another production. But I do. Casting a woman of any colour in the role of a wife-killer defeats the purpose of writing a play putting a wife-killer on trial. More, it detracts from the constantly disavowed though endlessly rediscovered fact that domestic killers are overwhelmingly men.

Two final noteworthy facts: first, given my play's goal — to dismantle dominant white culture's excuses for wife-killing — its primary concern is not indigenous racial injustice. Second, this the latest eruption of white angst in the face of a white Othello featured, on the one hand, a white man rejecting as "whitewashing" a play that actually requires a racially diverse cast and, on the other, an all-white conference committee deciding he had a point, resulting — for the first time in the play's five-year performance history — in an all-white cast replacing a planned diverse one.

IN DEFENCE OF WHITE OTHELLO

I begin this defence of my white Othello in *Othello on Trial* directing attention to the play's subtitle, 'The Tragedy of Desdemona, the Wife', by way of highlighting the fact that this play is not Shakespeare's *Othello*. It is an adaptation, conceived within the socio-legal field as a dramatisation of a homicidal pattern endlessly rediscovered across all Anglophone jurisdiction — domestic killers are overwhelmingly men and most modern-day wife-killers facing trial in Anglophone courts, specifically in England where the play is set, are white men. This is even more emphatically the case with suiciding wife-killers, the *Othello* scenario, approximately 90% of whom are white men (Howe, 2019b). Accordingly, allowing a black actor to carry the burden of playing the ignominious role of the over emotional, irrationally jealous husband is not only precisely the kind of othering practice that has long been rightly condemned as racist. It also diverts attention from the empirical evidence about patterns of wife-killing in western societies. Early twenty-first century English law reformers were not diverted. They advocated abolishing the defence of provocation by infidelity, English wife-killers choice of

defence for centuries, on the ground that allegedly provoked femicide was '*our own* version of honour killing' (see Howe 2013 and 2019a, pp.11-12; my emphasis). This was, they emphasised, a white Englishman's cultural defence, one that had let men get away with murder for far too long. *Othello on Trial* seeks to dramatise the reformers' challenge to English culture and law by asking how a wife-killer like Othello will fare in an English court today now that provocation by infidelity has been abolished.

Taking Othello beyond his fictional origins, transporting him four centuries into late modernity and transforming him into a white wife killer, *sans* black face, the very opposite of whitewashing. It is a bid to contest the dominant culture's historically mandated version of honour killing by contesting Shakespeare's casting of a black Muslim as his sole wife-killing protagonist. No easy task that, targeting dominant cultures. As Robyn Wiegman notes in a scathing critique of that "confounding antiracist venture" — whiteness studies in the 1990s — any attempt to forge "a counter whiteness that disaffiliates from white supremacist practices" can run into a host of tricky problems (1999, pp. 117-8). Not least is running head on into the paradox of the utopian leftist desire to forge "an antiracist white (or post-white) subject" that has produced instead an anxious humanist subject "hyperconscious of itself" (1999, p.123 and p.149). Just so my hyper vigilant critic imagining he was advancing the anti-racism cause with his knee-jerk response to my play's staging of whiteness.

Addressing whiteness "as a system of power and privilege", rendering it visible as "a cultural, political location" and as "an identity maintained through everyday communication" is no mean feat (Warren and Fassett, 2004, pp. 411-2). Nevertheless, creating critical performances of whiteness so as to make "the invisible and naturalised processes of whiteness more visible, more visceral, more present", attempting to "enflesh" whiteness in order to subvert its "unmarked centre of cultural power" is a potential way forward (Warren and Fassett, 2004, pp. 412-6). My Othello project in situated within this paradigm. Should its premise be so difficult for some white folk to grasp? After all, Othello was not actually a black man but rather a white man's idea of a black man, played by a white actor in black face. In short, as one Shakespeare scholar notes, "Othello was a white man" (O'Callaghan, 2000). He still is.

CASTING OTHELLO – CRITICAL RACE SHAKESPEARE SCHOLARSHIP

While *Othello on Trial* started out as a socio-legal project seeking new ways of engaging the wider community with decades of feminist investigative research on intimate partner femicides, it brings that research into dialogue with critical race Shakespeare scholarship. Already by the late twentieth century, the literature on race in *Othello* alone had become so extensive that full citation was impossible (Neill, 1998, p. 361). This then is a necessarily selective reading confined to key studies that problematise casting decisions in productions of *Othello*.

A brief history of the performance history of *Othello* reveals critical race scholars grappling with Othello's unique casting conundrums, indicatively the many racial identities imposed on the Moor. There's the nineteenth century preference for a tawny Arab Moor and his gradual whitening over a black protagonist, now perceived as unpalatably racist (eg Orkin, 1987; Cohen 1993; MacDonald 1994). Nigerian writer Ben Okri sees Othello as "the white man's myth of the Black man" (cited in de Gravelles 2011, pp. 157-8). How then can he be cast without entertaining that myth's negative stereotyping? Others argue that if he is played by a white man, white audiences might "indulge in the liberatory pleasure of the 'primitive'". Still others have suggested that he needs to be in blackface to

expose him as "the product of a white imagination represented by English actors to a white audience" (cited in de Gravelles 2011, pp. 160-66). The blackface they have in mind is emphatically not the literal, fetishising of blackness such as Oliver performed but rather a "strategic blackface" that can "foreground the fact that the category of 'race' itself as the figment of a white man's imagination" (Ivengar, 2002, p.105). A modern-day black face performance, it is argued, would expose Shakespeare's protagonist as a white writer's caricature of a black man, though this view is also not without its critics (Vaughan 2005; Thompson, 2009).

Black actors have been foremost amongst *Othello's* critics. Sidney Poitier refused the role, stating, "I cannot go on stage and give audiences a black man who is a dupe" (cited in Thompson, 2016, p. 87). British actor Hugh Quarshie's view is widely cited:

> If a black actor plays Othello does he not risk making racial stereotypes seem legitimate and even true? When a black actor plays a role written for a white actor in black makeup and for a predominantly white audience, does he not encourage the white way, or rather the wrong way, of looking at black men, namely that black men, or 'Moors', are over-emotional, excitable and unstable…Of all parts in the canon, *perhaps* Othello is the one which should most definitely not be played by a black actor
>
> (cited in Thompson, 2016, pp.65-6; my emphasis).

I emphasise Quarshie's 'perhaps' because he was to later revise this view, expressed in 1998, when he agreed to play Othello in a 2016 production designed to allow the audience to see what Othello and Desdemona saw in each other despite their age difference. Making both Iago and Othello black, thereby disposing of the notion that a credulous black man could be easily fooled by a cunning white man and portraying Othello as a man coming to realise, he has been exploited by a ruthless Venetian state made this, for Quarshie, a "landmark" production (Quarshie, 2016). By contrast, in *American Moor,* a sustained interrogation of the issues faced by a black actor playing Othello, especially one being told how to by a white director, Keith Hamilton Cobb leaves tantalisingly open the question of whether a black actor should play Othello today (Cobb-Hamilton, 2020).

Summarising responses of black writers to *Othello* at the turn of the twenty-first century, Ayanna Thompson notes that while by the 1980s Othello had become a role that only black male actors performed, casting practices are still fraught and particularly so for modern productions because "the continued cultural force of Bardolatry renders it difficult to create appropriate productions that enable an oppositional gaze for race in performance" (2016, pp. 65-66). But interestingly, and germane to my argument, Thompson approves of a German production featuring a white woman in the Othello role in high heels and strapless dress, who dons a gorilla costume and is never "made up to look like a black man". There is, she argues, "nothing mimetic about this performance mode: everything is conveyed through representational metaphors which render Othello's race less of a stable physical marker and more of a fractured and performative one". The gorilla costume "renders racialised discourses, narrative and performance modes as constructed entities that often have nothing to do with real bodies". It acts to expose "various uncomfortable racialised narratives" in a production in which "anybody can be rendered racialised in a social system that is determined to racialise" (2016, pp. 100-1).

FROM *OTHELLO* TO *OTHELLO ON TRIAL* – A FEMINIST CRIMINOLOGICAL APPROPRIATION

Having canvassed these viewpoints and those of other critical race scholars on *Othello*'s performance history, too many to include here, it is my view that Shakespeare's Othello is unplayable. In agreement with Quarshie's initial position that casting a black actor as the tragic protagonist cannot avoid reinforcing racist stereotypes about black men, I am unconvinced by his later view that the role is reclaimable when blame for his duping is shifted from Iago to the white state. Nor am I convinced by the case Thompson makes for the German production's gorilla-dressed white woman. For it leaves unproblematised the fact that Shakespeare's protagonist was not only a white man's racialised image of a black man; he was also a man who killed his wife. The sexed specificity of this intimate partner homicide is eclipsed if played by — *and as* — a woman. Thompson's acclaim for the German production exemplifies how, as I have argued elsewhere, *Othello*'s pivotal race question can overdetermine readings of the play (Howe 2019b, pp. 66-67). It can blind scholars and audiences alike to that fact that while it is absolutely essential to register, as *Othello on Trial* does, that Othello was a Moor who was "blackened" by racist language, it is just as important to "remain mindful" of what another scholar calls "women's issues" (Rackin, 2006, pp.9-11) — say, femicide.

But in any event, *Othello's* casting conundrums are not mine. For while the performance history of *Othello* informs my play, that play is not Shakespeare's. It is an adaptation that reads *Othello* as at once a brilliantly prescient challenge to the profoundly gendered or, as I prefer to say, sexed construction of 'crimes of passion' *and* as 'a great test case for racial thinking' (Howard, 2006, p.112). This makes Shakespeare's play an extraordinarily rich site for feminist appropriation — for exploring the discursive construction of the impassioned wife killer and his time-honoured excuses for murder and also for registering what the English law reformers meant when they called the defence of provocation a cultural defence for Englishmen. But it becomes so only by transforming Othello into a white man.

Not that this means losing sight of *Othello's* pivotal race question. On the contrary, as Ania Loomba argues, the category of "race" needs to be "acknowledged as heterogeneous, so much so as to include whiteness" (Loomba, 1994; p. 29). To that end, *Othello on Trial* foregrounds white and black raced identities as well as culturally inscribed sex specific excuses for intimate partner femicide by deploying casting models advocated by Ayanna Thompson. In her book with Laura Tuchi, *Teaching Shakespeare with Purpose: A Student-Centred Approach* (2016), which queries assumptions about Shakespeare's universality and colour-blindness, she advocates ditching colour-blind casting models. Instead, she favours either "conscious casting" where the actors' race *and* gender are clearly framed and their differences highlighted or "cross-cultural casting" in which "the entire world of the play" is translated to a different culture, location, and time period (2016, pp. 74-79). *Othello on Trial's* agenda precisely.

Theatre, it is argued, "performs cultural work" while protest theatre does political work that makes use of "a past masterpiece to examine a present tragedy" (Seef, 2009, pp.378-379). My play enlists *Othello* to do cultural work that becomes intensely political as it dissects dominant white culture. Other appropriations of *Othello* have different agendas. Tony Morrison's *Desdemona* rifts on the Act 4 Barbary song, imagining Desdemona in an after-life conversation with her African nurse Barbary that highlights the traumas of race, class, gender, and war. Keith Cobb-Hamilton's *American Moor* focuses on Othello's famous Act 1 speech to the senate in order to highlight the difficulties faced by a black actor performing that speech, especially when being directed by a white director (Cobb-Hamilton,

2020). By contrast, my adaptation starts with Othello's self-justifying final speech in Act 5, changing the ending so that Othello remains alive to stand trial for murdering Desdemona. *This* Othello, it needs emphasising, is not playing Shakespeare's fictional character. He is playing a modern-day wife killer, his defence lawyer following the script adopted by wife-killers in English courts over the four centuries since the fictional Othello strode the stage. This Othello was conceived as a white man and has remained so through the play's five-year development.

Crucially, however, my play-script requires at least one black or ethnic minority actor to play the prosecutor or defence lawyer. The defendant's whiteness can either be left to the audience as a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffeckt* — an unspoken and unexplicated defamiliarising of the familiar, a shock to thought, a matter for curious investigation — or spelled out by the players. In its latest iteration, the script casts a black actor as the prosecutor and names him Aaron Moore after Aaron ("is black so base a hue") from *Titus Andronicus*. In that role he not only carries the feminist argument against defence arguments in mitigation of wife-killers; he also takes satisfaction in wreaking revenge on Shakespeare for creating such stereotyped evil or easily duped black characters.

OTHELLO WAS/IS A WHITE MAN

Context is crucial for understanding the assertion that 'Othello was a white man'. When voiced by a confederate-sympathising Miss Preston in the pre-civil rights South, it expresses her horror at the prospect of witnessing a black Othello marry a white Desdemona and, by extension, fear and loathing of miscegenation (Shapiro, 2020, pp. 136-7; Callaghan, 2000, p.76). It has an entirely different meaning when voiced by a late modern white feminist attuned to a strand of critical race scholarship that interrogates representations of whiteness in *Othello*. Critical race scholars have argued that the study of race in Shakespeare needs to move beyond a narrow approach restricted to black characters; that it is "too easy to settle for a narrowly formulated account of the problematics of Othello's black identity and to avoid direct focus on the problematics of white society itself" (Erickson, 2002, p. 133). In agreement, I read Shakespeare as gifting us a racialised protagonist who can, indeed must, be racialised as white when put on trial for murder today to avoid racist stereotyping of minority ethnic men *and* to reflect the constantly rediscovered fact that femicide-suicides in western societies are homicides mostly committed by white men. But casting Othello as a white man does more. It registers whiteness as "a fully realised racial category", thereby challenging its 'normative invisibility' and making it "an object for critical interrogation", precisely as critical race scholars deems necessary (Smith, 2016a, p. 107 and Smith, 2016b, pp. 119-122).

Moreover, my Othello must be a white *man*. Lest we forget, there is a critical relationship between race and gender as Kim F. Hall reminded us in her majestic foundational critical race text: *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (1996). Examining how ideologies of fairness and the language of darkness and light were racialised in early modern England where blackness helped create "a value for whiteness" and fairness became a medium for "shaping the subjectivity of white English women", Hall emphasises that "gender concerns are crucially embedded in discourses of race" (1996, p. 2 and p.10). Such gender concerns, it needs to be said, are sometimes overlooked in more recent critical race scholarship.

AGAINST WHITE IGNORANCE

Naming black feminists as vocal advocates of studying whiteness, Hall singles out bell hooks who thirty years ago warned that the late modern interest in "difference" by white scholars may perpetuate racism without a sustained critique of whiteness. According to hooks,

> …only a persistent, rigorous and informed critique of whiteness could really determine what forces of denial, fear and competition are responsible for creating fundamental gaps between professed political commitment to eradicating racism and the participation in the construction of a discourses on race that perpetuates racial domination. (hooks, 1990, p. 54)

Such a critique, Hall insists, must make whiteness and its hegemonic power visible by deploying pedagogical strategies that "stop regarding only people of colour as racial subjects" (Hall, 1996, pp.267-8). Not that this prevents *Othello* from being a racially-charged play, for "even when Othello is not portrayed as black, the play is always about race, albeit not in the way we think of it now" (Hall, 2003, p. 358). *Othello on Trial* is framed as a contribution to the anti-racist project that hooks, Hall and other leading black scholars outline – one making whiteness visible and holding it to account. That process of shifting the focus to white hegemony and dominant cultures' racialised othering practices has been underway for decades. As eminent postcolonial critic Edward Said explains

> …studying the relationship between the 'West' and its dominated cultural 'others' is not just a way of understanding an unequal relationship between unequal interlocutors, but also a point of entry into studying the formation and meaning of Western cultural practices themselves (Said, 1993, p. 230).

Othello, with its "endless relay of 'othering' centring on the improbable desires of an Italian bride who proudly prefers black to white", clearly portrays early modern English biases against Africans, Moors and Italians. As such it has long been recognised by critical race scholars as an invaluable point of entry into the formation of the cultural practices of dominant groups (Brown, 2004, p. 151).

All this work undertaken within and without Shakespeare studies appears to have passed my race-conscious white critic by. Ignorance, the white supremicist kind, has its theorists (e.g. Mills, 2008). But that is not the kind of ignorance besetting my critic. Nor is it the kind explored in Elizabeth Spelman's close reading of the white ignorance condemned in James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* — the "spineless ignorance" of those who avoid having convictions (Spelman, 2007, p. 125). My critic certainly had those, so secure was he in his belief that he had sniffed out yet another egregious case of theatrical whitewashing that he was prepared to denounce it publicly. Perhaps all that can be hoped for is that he embarks on an expansive reading programme to learn about the deleterious effects of hyped-up white selfhood that advances anti-racist practices exactly nowhere.

To conclude: I concur with the black actors who read the role of Shakespeare's Othello as unplayable. By contrast, my Othello, the defendant in a murder trial, *is* playable, but only by a white man — unless, of course, *Othello on Trial* is performed by an all-black cast as it was in London in 2016. In that production, performed by students at an East London school, whiteness disappeared as a problematic racial category, but at least it was not vulnerable to accusations of "whitewashing".

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