Othello/YouTube

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Shakespeare on Screen: Othello

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Othello/*YouTube*

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As the various essays in this collection demonstrate, the *Othello*s we get on screen negotiate the play's constructions of race, class, gender, religion, and sexuality in various ways. There is no singular *Othello* on screen; instead we get a series of lenses that seem variously to un-do and re-do earlier foci. While it is not exactly linear, there is a way in which one can track the pendulum-like nature of filmic presentations of *Othello*. They swing between a few central interpretive stances: class versus race; race versus gender; gender versus sexuality; femininity (as represented in a domestic sphere) versus masculinity (as represented in a militaristic sphere); etc. While *Othello* on screen does not emerge as unified or consistent, there is an uncanny organization to the interpretative swings on the big screen.

*Othello*s on the digital screen, however, employ different interpretive pendula that currently swing between the pilfered, the pedagogic, and the parodic. This has not always been the case on YouTube, and I expect that it will not continue to be the case in the future. The faddish nature of the digital platform ensures that uploads vary by ever-shifting trending styles. In this essay, I begin by outlining the first trends of *Othello* on YouTube, but I devote most of the essay to a discussion of the most recent trends. Taken as a whole, online *Othello*s point to the ongoing contemporary debates about the relationships between performances of race and generic outcomes.

Shortly after the first video sharing website launched in 1997, there emerged several competing internet sites that enable video file sharing.[1] YouTube, however, quickly

became the most popular. Founded in February 2005, officially launched in December 2005, and purchased by Google in November 2006, YouTube advertised itself as 'empowering [people] to become the broadcasters of tomorrow,' and the company's official tagline was initially 'Broadcast Yourself.'[2] It is interesting to note that the company's rhetoric has changed significantly since its inception, now declaring that its mission 'allows billions of people to discover, watch, and share originally-created videos. YouTube provides a forum for people to connect, inform, and inspire others across the globe and acts as a distribution platform for original content creators and advertisers large and small.'[3]

Casually typing 'Shakespeare' into the YouTube search engine, one now receives a prompt stating that over 1,000,000 video clips related to Shakespeare have been uploaded by users and are available for viewing. On the whole, they are a strange combination of pirated film and television clips, music videos, mashups, and parodies. In 2010 I wrote an essay about the proliferation of student-created Shakespeare performances uploaded to YouTube, and I focused on the ways students navigate performances of race through performances of *Othello*.[4] The videos analyzed in that essay were all produced in 2007 and 2008, which now appears to have been the apex of student-created videos uploaded to YouTube.

While YouTube is still going strong in 2015, the fad for uploading amateur Shakespeare videos has passed (although there are still some gems out there, like this teacher's DIY video performed to the music from Miley Cyrus's song 'Wrecking Ball' with original lyrics about *Othello*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SLddg35baOA). This essay examines the latest trend in *Othello*-related videos: the edited clip from professional productions (both theatrical and filmic); commentaries on *Othello* produced by theater

companies (e.g., from The National Theatre in London and the Folger Theatre in Washington, DC); and professionally produced parodies and satires (e.g., Key and Peele's skit, 'Othello Tis My Shite'). *Othello* on the computer screen, then, looks somewhat different than *Othello* on large and small screens: online *Othello*s are much more diverse and at odds with each other about *Othello*'s place in the twenty-first century world. I realize as I type these words, however, that this essay will date itself as soon as it appears online. The current trends in online *Othello*s are precisely that – the current trends for this specific historical moment in 2015. Nonetheless, these current trends are fascinating not only for the way they differ from the trends five-ten years ago, but also for the way they mark *Othello*'s current use in discussions about identity politics.

THE ARCHIVAL IMPULSE

While in the early days of YouTube there were scholarly debates about whether the site functioned as a performance archive, it is clear by 2015 that many upload materials to the site as a way to preserve and share older performances including ones of *Othello*. For example, Paul Robeson's Broadway run in *Othello* (1943-44 in the Shubert Theatre), which was directed by Margaret Webster and starred José Ferrer as Iago and Uta Hagen as Desdemona, was recorded in a studio in the summer of 1944. That two-hour recording has been uploaded to YouTube accompanied by 30 photographic images from the production run, many of which are little known and/or infrequently reproduced: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xgGTkaovWzw. In other words, the person who created this YouTube video seems to have been thinking in terms of curation and preservation, and the comments posted to the video support this idea. Many who comment

on the video express appreciation for being able to experience the performance: 'So glad to be able to hear this incredible performance'; 'Thank you! I've wanted to hear this for a very long time, without having to buy it'; and 'thanks a lot. I have the original recording though, but I'm pleased that more people can enjoy this lovely rendition of Othello, so more people can enjoy my beloved Paul!'

Similarly, Orson Welles's 1952 film version of *Othello*, which is largely out of circulation and is not currently available to purchase, has been uploaded to YouTube 'solely for educational purposes as it has gone out of print and has never been made available since': https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=09NWcKA7JKw. Again, the comments attached to the video support the idea that the uploader has performed a valuable service by preserving and sharing this material: 'Good on ya, CW, for uploading this! It is certainly preferable to the 1992 restoration'; 'Thanks so much uploader'; and 'I would like to extend my most sincere thanks. I saw this film in the mid to late 70's – undoubtedly an old print of the 1952 release or the 1955 release. I was absolutely fascinated – but then did not see it again for many years as it vanished from circulation. A lost treasure indeed.' Because it has been acknowledged that YouTube has attracted far more viewers than uploaders, many viewers express gratitude for the often-unnamed uploaders who take the time to curate, preserve, and share these rare materials.

The notes of archival appreciation are especially poignant when one realizes the fleeting nature of full-length uploads. For instance, I fully expected to include a link to the 1981 BBC production of *Othello*, directed by Jonathan Miller and starring Anthony Hopkins as Othello, Bob Hoskins as Iago, and Penelope Wilton as Desdemona, but that video is no longer available on YouTube. While Oliver Parker's 1995 film version, starring Laurence

Fishburne as Othello, Kenneth Branagh as Iago, and Irene Jacob as Desdemona is still available on YouTube, it is only now available as a rental video ($2.99 US). Thus, the archival function of YouTube should neither be under-estimated (these videos are seen, appreciated, and commented upon) nor over-estimated (the uploads can be as ephemeral as live performances, depending on copyright enforcement and/or the vagaries of the uploaders).

Fascinatingly, the uploaded video of the 1965 production of *Othello*, directed by Stuart Burge and starring Laurence Olivier as Othello, Frank Finlay as Iago, and Maggie Smith as Desdemona, provides the opportunity for an extended discussion about casting, race, and contemporary performances of Shakespeare. So the archive on YouTube for this production becomes a type of archive of the various reactions to racial casting: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mCJjrx7MH0o.[5] Some comments work to place Olivier's blackface performance in a type of historical context, stating, 'Suspension of disbelief is required. It seems superfluous these days with so many accomplished black actors around but they were fewer in those days and black-face was common and accepted practice. Boys often played female roles too.' Other comments work to defend Olivier's decision to play Othello, arguing that the complicated nature of the Shakespearean verse made (and still makes) it difficult for many to play the part: 'So far I haven't seen or heard a black actor who could play Othello "correctly," i.e. with at least the basic requirements an actor should have for the part. Apart from two actually: Robeson and J[ames] E[arl] Jones. I think that no-Whites policy is a load of crap and dangerous. What is racist to me is to tell a black guy, 'hey, you're black, go play Othello; no one cares that you're bad so long as you're black."' And still other comments work to challenge the previous comment by attempting to

illuminate a different performance archive: 'What a joke. Chiwetel Ejiofor, James Earl Jones, Jeffrey Wright, Adrian Lester, Willard White, Eamonn Walker, Laurence Fishburne to name A FEW have all played internationally and critically acclaimed Othellos. . . . go look it up and revisit your skewed perspective.' These three sample comments neatly encapsulate the reception archive for *Othello* in performance. The debates tend to revolve around the importance of understanding the historical casting practices (e.g., early modern performance practices), the significance of the challenges of the Shakespearean verse and the relative dearth of actors of color in classical training programs, and the cultural and economic impacts on erasing and/or neglecting the acting profiles for actors of color.[6] In other words, YouTube functions not only as a type of performance archive for obscure or hard to obtain performances of *Othello*, but also as a type of reception archive, documenting various, sometimes competing, horizons of expectation.

The archival impulse is also very strong for fans of Shakespearean citations in popular culture. For instance, users of YouTube have uploaded episode 1 of season 3 of the American television show *Sanford and Son* (1973), in which Lamont, who is taking acting classes, must perform as Othello opposite a white woman from Beverly Hills: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d1RT5vtGGFk. In the opening scene, Lamont (played by Demond Wilson) practices his lines opposite one of his black, male friends (played by Nathaniel Taylor), who proudly declares, 'Out of sight, dude. Hey, move over Laurence Olivier and make room for Lamont Sanford, the new Othello.' Produced and aired during the heyday of the black arts movement, this episode of *Sanford and Son* explores the tensions between a belief that Shakespeare could lead to social mobility (Lamont boasts, 'Hey Rollo, who knows what this might lead to: from a junk yard to a neighborhood theater

to Broadway and to my first motion picture') and a belief that Shakespeare has nothing of value to say to modern race relations (Fred Sanford states, 'Now about this play, didn't you know Jack the Ripper was a white man?'). Although the entire catalogue for *Sanford and Son* is currently available on DVD, one can easily find this episode by simply looking under *Othello* on YouTube: it has been tagged in such a way that those looking for *Othello* videos will find this in the archive.

The same holds true for the uploaders who have posted the 1982 episode of the American television show *Fame* called 'The Strike,' in which the students at the performing arts high school perform a musical version of *Othello* (season 1, episode 7): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZalBUhWtTwo. Because the teachers have gone on strike, the students must work their way through the difficulties of Shakespeare on their own, and the end result is a fascinating mash-up of pseudo-historical accuracy (vaguely Elizabethan costumes) and modernized music, lyrics, and dance. Their musical boils down the entire plot of *Othello* to a 2.5-minute performance, in which the song is primarily a duet between Othello and Iago:

IAGO:	Such a fine kind of lady
	Making the boys so crazy
	There's something you should know
	About Desdemona
OTHELLO:	Don't you ever leave me
	Don't know what I'd do
	Can't I just believe your love
	Is really true?
IAGO:	She just might deceive you
	Take you for a fool
OTHELLO:	I can't stand the thought of someone
	Touch you.

Once again, the comments posted to this video give voice to the appreciation for archiving and sharing difficult-to-find material. One fan wrote, 'This is one of the best eps[isode]. . . [T]he whole Othello story in 2 and a half minutes. . . . Great stuff, thanks for posting!'

Like the *Sanford and Son* episode, 'The Strike' is easy to find if one only uses 'Othello' as the search term (i.e., one does not have to search under *Fame* or 'The Strike'). This represents a significant aspect of YouTube's response to the archival impulse: the website does not desegregate or disaggregate what one might refer to as 'high culture' archives from 'low culture' archives. Instead, high and low are thoroughly integrated and mixed depending on the algorithms for viewing: high and low no longer exist on YouTube because overall popularity and individual viewing patterns determine what shows up for any given search.[7]

THE PEDAGOGICAL IMPULSE

Another trend in online *Othello*s is the sharing of educational commentary on the play, and these uploads implicitly acknowledge the use of online materials as supplements for both students and teachers in secondary classrooms. Thus, the larger theater companies that have established education departments often upload videos that speak directly to teachers and/or students about ways to frame discussions about *Othello*.

For instance, the Folger Shakespeare Library uploaded a series of eleven videos about teaching *Othello*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=trhHBQRJUcQ&list=PLR8P-dSNaJkWISMNLpQE5Gat_2aYcYh67. Organized around thematic topics, such as deception, jealousy, and race and religion, these short videos are a mixture of scholars and teachers discussing pedagogical approaches to *Othello*, and short filmed clips from the 2011

production of *Othello* at the Folger, directed by Robert Richmond and starring Owiso Odera as Othello, Ian Merrill Peakes as Iago, and Janie Brookshire as Desdemona.

The Folger's videos, however, present a common tension in the pedagogical impulse exhibited on YouTube: the text is rendered at once both utterly foreign with videos devoted to the unique qualities of early modern weaponry and music (and the performance itself was staged in period costumes) and utterly timely with videos devoted to explaining how *Othello* will appeal to students who are themselves struggling with issues of love, jealousy, feelings of isolation, and bullying. There is, in fact, a certain whiplash feeling to these videos in which both the distance and nearness of the Shakespearean text are presented in hyperbolic terms. When the pedagogical impulse is demonstrated on YouTube there seems to be no middle ground for Shakespeare: the man, the plays, and the cultural relevance are tonally rendered in ALL CAPS!!!

The National Theatre in London avoided the whiplash effect I describe above by landing firmly on the timely side, providing a series of videos for teachers and students that speak more univocally to the relevance of *Othello*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jyoCIwJn9Ic&list=PLXu353usWYatAIQLAH7DoXQCPSniCBNy2. It is important to note that the National's production coincided with the annual national exam for 11-14 year olds (the GCSE, formerly O-level exam) in which *Othello* was the required text for the exam that year. Interestingly, none of the seven videos posted to YouTube (which range from a 3-minute video on how the company staged the fight scenes to a 45-minute interview with two of the leading actors) takes on the early modern context for the play. Instead, the National is clearly attempting to frame *Othello* within the history of black actors in Shakespeare, the changing approaches to representations of race onstage,

and the modern military context for the play. Implicitly the theater is asking teachers to re-frame the discussions about *Othello* to be ones governed by a focus on the here-and-now instead of on a distant historical past. Nothing in their YouTube videos even comes close to framing *Othello* through early modern history. Their pedagogical impulse is clearly focused on today.

THE PARODIC IMPULSE

Although parody as a genre has been recognized and popularly employed since at least Greek antiquity (Aristotle attributes Hegemon of Thasos as the inventor of the genre[8]), the turn of the second millennium has seen the meteoric rise in the genre's popularity with the overwhelming success of Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show* (1999-2015) and Stephen Colbert's *The Colbert Report* (2005-14). And thus, the original content produced for video-sharing websites like YouTube has followed suit with parodies flooding the digital screens.

I will begin by discussing an example of an *Othello* parody that was not initially created as online material, but which has afforded the producers a type of Renaissance in their popularity. While the first iteration of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)* was staged in 1987 by the Reduced Shakespeare Company (RSC), video-sharing websites like YouTube have renewed audience interest in the RSC's parodic take on Shakespeare. The 3-minute rap that constitutes their take on *Othello*, in fact, generates many comments and online debates about how best to navigate the relationship between Shakespearean parodies and performances of race: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1tWoKm7cYM. For instance, one viewer who

defended the humor of the video, wrote, 'This is just contemporizing Shakespeare for an audiences [sic] entertainment. If we are on the topic of racism then perhaps you should actually read the play *Othello* and tell everyone how racist some of the character[s] in it are towards the [M]oor. Is Shakespeare a racist as well then?' Responding to this comment directly, another viewer posted, '[T]his isn't "contemporizing" Shakespeare. The play uses his material for comedic references and doesn't retain any of his themes. I don't think they're [sic] intention was to "contemporize" Shakespeare. I think most of the play is funny, but that was racist – like a lot of comedy. And yes, as a white man living in 16th/17th century England, W.S. was probably racist. Duh.' What is fascinating about these online debates is the fact that they replicate academic debates about the proper function of parodic adaptations; debates about their relationship between the adaptation and the 'original'; and debates about the place of performances of race within that relationship.[9]

There are also parodic materials online that purport to have an educational emphasis. 'Thug Notes,' a series of videos uploaded to YouTube by the company Wisecrack Inc, features a fictional African-American 'thug' ('Sparky Sweets, PhD' who is played by the comedian Greg Edwards) who provides summaries and analyses of classical literature. While the summaries and analyses are often entertaining and insightful, the video devoted to *Othello* offers an interesting commentary on violence in the contemporary United States: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gij5xNvCYiQ. It begins with Sparky Sweets, declaring, 'This week haters gonna hate with *Othello* by William Shakespeare.' Because the video quickly turns to an announcement that the summary of the play will follow, Professor Sweets' declaration hangs ambiguously. Are 'haters gonna hate' because the text being reviewed is about hating? Or, are 'haters gonna hate' because the text being reviewed is

Othello, a text that many hate because of its representations of race? Then at the end of his summary of *Othello* when he describes how Desdemona and Emilia are both killed, Professor Sweets asks, 'Damn, what is this the NFL?' alluding to a recent spate of violent attacks performed by players in the National Football League (USA). Professor Sweets also seems to indicate his dissatisfaction with the play's conclusion, summarizing and then commenting, 'Knowing he got played, Othello stabs Iago, then ices himself before the Popo [slang for police] can put him away for good. Damn.' The sadness in his voice and demeanor speak volumes about the conflicted responses many have to *Othello*. And yet, the video shies away from any direct discussions of race: Othello's Moorishness is not even mentioned except obliquely by the fact that the images used to represent Othello include Sparky Sweets' face.

Primarily, though, the parodic impulse is employed to make light of Shakespeare's tragic plots, including *Othello*. But occasionally the parodic impulse allows for an explicit cultural-historical critique of texts that can be viewed as outdated, out of touch, and/or irrelevant in today's world. For instance, 'Sassy Gay Friend – Othello,' is a 1.5 minute video that shows a despondent Desdemona (played by Maribeth Monroe) speaking with an incredulous gay friend (played by Brian Gallivan), who pops out of her closet: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LKttq6EUqbE. Despite the fact that the video has a DIY feel, it is actually produced by the Second City Network, the online presence of the Second City comedy troupe from Chicago. The parody makes it clear that Desdemona's outcome in Shakespeare's *Othello* should not be viewed as fated. An unseen narrator begins the video by declaring, 'Meet Desdemona from Shakespeare's *Othello*. She is waiting in her bed to be murdered by her husband. This fate could have been avoided if she had a sassy

gay friend.' Therefore, this Desdemona does get out of the bed to avoid her death, and even ends the video laughing with her sassy gay friend about whether 'Moor means more' (with a gesture to his genitalia). The plot of Shakespeare's *Othello*, the video implies, can and should be rewritten to empower Desdemona to avoid the tragic ending of the play: *Othello* can end on a laugh instead of tears.

And finally, the Key and Peele skit, 'Othello Tis My Shite,' which initially aired on November 6, 2013 on the American television network Comedy Central, found viral popularity on YouTube and other video-sharing websites: https://vimeo.com/channels/keypeele/80117015. In this video, Keegan-Michael Key plays Lashawnio and Jordan Peele plays Martinzion, two black audience members who attend the seventeenth-century opening performance of *Othello* at the Globe. The heart of the parody stems from the fact that the two men misinterpret the genre of the play at the intermission. They read *Othello* as a revenge comedy in which the Moor of Venice is on the ascendency in terms of prestige, power, and his ability to exact revenge against 'white people':

> LASHAWNIO: Oh, this play doth seem dope to me, Martinzion.
> MARTINZION: Verily, Lashawnio, verily. And 'tis about time Shakespeare doth scriven a play that places a brother amongst the firmaments.
> LASHAWNIO: That's my shite!
> . . .
> MARTINZION: Me thinks things are looking up for people of the darker hue.

It is not until the conclusion of the play that Lashawnio and Martinzion realize that the play is a tragedy for Othello: 'How they gonna kill Othello?!' Martinzion shouts in disbelief, 'Let me tell you something. If a brother killed himself every time he broke up with a white bitch the world would be bereft of brothers.'

The parodic impulse to transform a Shakespearean tragedy into a comedy is writ large in this video when Lashawnio and Martinzion confront 'Shakespeares' and make him rewrite the play: 'A black man got it goin' on and you shuffle off his mortal coil?' In the final moments, we see a playbill for a new play by William Shakespeare, 'Shafte, a play in five acts by William Shakespeare,' with a picture of Richard Roundtree, the African-American actor who played Shaft in the 1971 Blaxploitation film directed by Gordon Parks, in an engraving of an early modern street scene.

The power of this video's parody is the sense that black audiences are not now, and would not have been then, satisfied with *The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice*. The video makes it clear that a narrative arc that moves the Moor from a position of empowerment to disempowerment and destruction is not one that appeals to black audiences and that they should protest to those who hold the quill. Like the parodic thrust of 'Sassy Gay Friend – Othello,' 'Othello Tis My Shite' implicitly asks its audiences to question the utility of this tragic narrative. The ending need not be fatalistic.

With the trend moving away from the initial YouTube tagline, 'Broadcast Yourself,' toward a trend of watching and consuming vast amounts (perhaps the new tagline should be 'Consume Others'), online *Othello*s now reside in the hands of 'professionals': films and recordings that are archived with a specialist's attention; educational materials that are assembled by professional theater companies, and parodic materials that are produced by professional comedy troupes and television networks. The DIY aesthetic that marked the early days of YouTube, including uploads tagged with *Othello*, have now been outstripped by professionally produced content.

While this trend has led to a less diverse field of online *Othello*s, it has not produced a homogenous field of conservatively rendered Shakespeare. On the contrary, surveying the current state of YouTube *Othello*s, I am left with the impression that Shakespeare's *Othello* provides a vehicle through which producers and viewers collectively work through the meaning(s) of race in performance. And yet YouTube *Othello*s are also currently highly skeptical about the utility of employing Shakespeare's play for anything other than tragic and disempowering narratives. This sentiment echoes one I noted in the DIY student videos that were created in 2007 and 2008: 'The students' persistent questions about the need for a tragic ending to *Othello* . . . implicitly deconstruct notions of Shakespeare's universal applicability.'[10] It is interesting to note that professional producers of online content continue to return to *Othello* to make this point. We should pause to question, however, if this will continue to be the case, or if Shakespeare will be left behind as the conversations about performances of race move forward. Only time will tell.

Notes

[1] In 1997, Chris Norlin founded ShareYourWorld.com, the first video sharing website. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_oe15jrvOI

[2] For YouTube's rhetoric about its own creation (prior to ownership by Google) see: www.youtube.com/t/about. Accessed July 1, 2008.

[3] For YouTube's current rhetoric about its purpose see: https://www.youtube.com/yt/about/. Accessed April 20, 2015.

[4] Ayanna Thompson, 'Unmooring the Moor: Researching and Teaching on YouTube,' *Shakespeare Quarterly* 61.3 (2010): 337–56.

[5] From the time of researching and writing this essay and its publication online, the link to this video along with the comments posted to it have been removed from YouTube for copyright reasons. I have maintained the 'dead' link, however, because it underscores the ephemeral nature of the materials posted to video sharing websites.

[6] I have written about this phenomenon elsewhere: 'The published praise that calls an actor of color the first, the newcomer, the one to watch, creates the "Jedi mind trick" that numbs the actor into thinking a profile will follow. Instead, the "force" is constantly moving to the next "first." This, of course, stunts an actor's ability to move up to more prestigious, challenging, and varied roles.' 'To Notice or Not To Notice: Shakespeare, Black Actors, and Performance Reviews,' *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation* 4.1 (2008): 1–15.

[7] For an essay about YouTube's recent change to their algorithm, see: Mark Robertson, 'Watch Time: A Guide to YouTube's #1 Ranking Factor,' *Reelseo* (September 26, 2014): http://www.reelseo.com/youtube-watch-time/. Accessed April 20, 2015.

[8] Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated by George Whalley (Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 52.

[9] For a recent collection of essays that represent the most recent trends in scholarly approaches to adaptation and appropriation, see: *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation*, edited by Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[10] Ayanna Thompson, *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race, and Contemporary America* (London: Oxford University Press, 2011), 164.