

Ayanna Thompson, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Paperback £21.99. Pp 280. ISBN: 9781108710565. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108684750>.

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In her essay, ‘1492: A New World View’, the Jamaican writer and cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter writes: ‘The new order of secularizing modern state would map its own role-allocating mechanisms and unifying code of symbolic specificity onto a new notion of order. This new notion was to be based on a *by-nature difference* between Europeans, on the one hand, and people of indigenous and African descent, on the other’.¹ Germinating in the premodern past, and particularly striking at the watershed moment of Christopher Columbus’s voyage to the Caribbean, the colonial and imperial European project operates through the creation and perpetuation of a racial hierarchy hinging on white supremacy. The early modern stage constitutes one of the many sites where racialized epistemologies take shape, and the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries provide a medium through which these ideologies get tested and configured. Therefore, when Ayanna Thompson asks the pointed question, ‘Did the Concept of Race Exist for Shakespeare and His Contemporaries?’, she challenges her readers to consider the plethora of material and symbolic evidence animating the essays of this radical and transformative collection.

To be sure, Thompson’s introduction provides a capacious exposé of the multiple, malleable mechanisms of differentiation and dispossession operating in the world Shakespeare inhabited. In a succinct and straightforward definition of early modern race-making, Thompson effectively outlines the stakes at the heart of this collection: ‘Race is not a real thing’, she states; ‘the idea that race is a stable, identifiable biological trait comes from pseudo-scientific arguments that were created in the Enlightenment. The process of race-making is flexible so that it can be mobilized at different historical moments to create structural and material inequalities’ (7). From conduct, to religion, to somatic markers, race constructed and positioned people differently within a hierarchy of belonging and otherness; entitlement and non-entitlement; and power and inequality.

Such a reading of early modern power structures, predicated on the exclusion of Blackness, were not always a *fait accompli*, however. Thompson takes to task critics who have appealed to anachronism as a way to disregard early modern racial formations; more importantly, her sustained engagement with race

naysayers models a scholarly reflection on the trajectory of her luminous career as a Black Shakespearean spanning three decades. Because racialized power structures are constantly shifting, Thompson urges her readers to keep sophisticated critical attention to race currents, where research methodologies are anchored in the historical moment that produced them. To this end, this collection brings together essays by established scholars of premodern critical race studies, early career scholars, and theatre practitioners, deepening our understanding of the building blocks of race in the age of Shakespeare.

The collection opens with Farah Karim-Cooper's essay on the materiality of race through the study of the symbolism of black and white binaries in early modern theatre. From prosthetics to cosmetic embellishments to costumes, the technologies of colour symbolism utilized on the stage, she argues, engender sensory associations of Blackness with negativity and whiteness with the ideals of virtue and beauty. Ambereen Dadabhoy's analysis of what she calls 'the documentary evidence of race' includes careful observation of official edits and state papers from European and non-European archives; these documents point to a sustained and prolonged agenda that positioned race and racial formations at the heart of early modern politics.

Particularly noteworthy are Patricia Akhimie and Carol Mejia LaPerle's interventions on constructions of race in Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies. Comedies, Akhimie argues, are awash with racist humour; communal laughter creates an ideal of social cohesion that rests on derogatory racial stereotypes and oppressive systems of exclusion. Similarly saturated in stigmatizing imagery, Shakespeare's tragedies, according to Mejia LaPerle, craft Blackness as a physiognomical projection of internal depravity. The didactic nature of the stage inculcates in its audience the equation of Black people as catalysts to social disruption. In the same vein, Andrew Hadfield's essay on the ways in which Shakespeare's histories grapple with hybridity and the fantasy of pure lineages is equally illuminating.

Noémie Ndiaye's sharp and sophisticated account of the global framework of Black studies made me see racializing narratives with new eyes. Her reading expands our understanding of race-making in *Titus Andronicus* in particular by showing how that history is intricately connected to colonization, globalization, and racial capitalism. Equally important is Miles Grier's energizing cri du coeur, 'Are Shakespeare's plays racially progressive?' that provides a nuanced and rich new seam for the study of Shakespeare's plays without negating or downplaying the racial violence in which they traffic.

Adding to this collection's scope, depth, and breadth are essays by top-tier scholars who have blazed trails in the field, including Virginia Mason Vaughan

and Alden T. Vaughan on *The Tempest*; Dennis Austin Britton on the imbrication of religion with racialization; and Melissa E. Sanchez on the interplay of non-normative sexualities, gender, and race-making in *Antony and Cleopatra*. As these critics demonstrate, the perspectives of literary criticism or cultural history are not antithetical to premodern critical race studies; their careful explication of the nuances of racial construction will provide helpful guidelines to continue these conversations. Nevertheless, Matthew Dimmock's, 'Experimental Othello', could have benefitted from closer contact with critical race theory's intersections with literary studies of Islam and race, particularly the work of Imtiaz Habib, Islam Issa, and Ambereen Dadabhoy, as well as the Medieval and Early Modern Orientals Collective, among others.

Continuing with the genealogy of actors of colour performing the Shakespeare corpus, Urvashi Chakravarty's characteristically incisive and eloquent essay traces the presence of Black actors in the UK, shedding light on the legal and popular archives housing these histories. Moreover, Chakravarty reflects on the glaring absences in the archives of performance history, where she argues that the exclusion of actors of colour is enmeshed in the history of race and race-making. A response to this lacuna materializes in Joyce Green MacDonald's essay, which relays the contributions of Black women in imagining, performing, and designing Shakespearean adaptations. Her discussion of the reception of Miss Welsh and Henrietta Vinton Davis's careers in the nineteenth century captures the depth and breadth of their vision and contribution to Black Shakespeare. Continuing with the archive of Black theatre practitioners, Scott Newstok outlines the sustaining philosophy of the first Black Shakespearean, Ira Aldridge.

Especially salutary is the actor Adrian Lester's essay on his perspective playing Othello, particularly the painful experience of witnessing the audience's amused reaction to racist slurs night after night. Indeed, Lester's poignant and moving essay clarifies the psychological and ethical burden that Black Shakespearean actors from Aldridge to Paul Robeson to Keith Hamilton Cobb carry while performing against a text whose infrastructure rests on racist stereotypes. Lester's distinctive combination of intellectual engagement and a lifetime of artistic labour complements the expansive spirit of the collection beautifully and evocatively; and it will prove useful to scholars, students, and theatre practitioners alike.

The collection ends with Sandra Young's and Arthur L. Little, Jr's, stirring homage to postcolonial and critical white studies, respectively. The strength of Young's account of postcolonial readings lies in the infectious enthusiasm she displays for the postcolonialist theories she examines. She arrives at a pedagogical and conceptual crossroad that this author's students found extremely illuminating

in the classroom and beyond. Little, Jr, pays homage to the Black, Indigenous, and marginalized scholars who laboured worthily in the field.

The theoretically-informed and historically-sensitive essays in this collection not only serve as an all-encompassing evaluation of race and racialization in the early modern past, but more emphatically, they convey an engaging projection towards the future of the field and the voices it will include. Cascading in rigorous methodologies, wide-ranging archives, and compassionate pedagogies, *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race* is one collection this happy reader will return to time and again: it sings, elevates, and imagines radically and otherwise.

Notes

- 1 Sylvia Wynter, '1492: A New World View', in *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View*, ed. Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex M. Nettleford (Washington, 1995), 5–57, 38. Emphasis in original.