SHAKESPEARE SURVEY

71

Re-Creating Shakespeare

Articles from the World Shakespeare Congress, 2016

EDITED BY

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India

79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.
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www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108470834
DOI: 10.1017/9781108557177

First published 2018

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd. Padstow Cornwall

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-108-47083-4 Hardback
ISSN 0080-9152

Citation: Della Gatta, Carla. "Shakespeare, Race, and 'Other' Englishes: The Q Brothers's *Othello: The Remix*," in *Shakespeare Survey, Special Edition on 'Re-Creating Shakespeare'*, Vol. 71 (2018): 74–87.

SHAKESPEARE, RACE AND 'OTHER' ENGLISHES: THE Q BROTHERS' *OTHELLO: THE REMIX*

CARLA DELLA GATTA

The 2015 announcement of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) *Play On!* project, which said that Shakespeare's plays would be translated into contemporary English by thirty-six American playwrights assisted by dramaturgs, was met with both curiosity and disdain, with some scholars taking to public forums to express their outrage. There was worry that these new translations would be prioritized for the stage over the originals; concern that theatres should help actors to continue to master technique rather than employ writers to translate the scripts into an 'easier' language, and, in many cases, dismay at the suggestion that Shakespeare's language requires translation. In his essay on the history of adapting Shakespeare's dialogue, Daniel Pollack-Pelzner concludes that 'in its combination of updating and deference, O.S.F.'s commission looks like an eighteenth-century project couched in nineteenth-century terms', a reference to changing the language without the intention of altering the play.[1] Although there is a theatrical legacy for altering Shakespeare's language, in the last century the conception that Shakespeare's language is definitive of his drama has been an earmark of his plays, leading James Shapiro to state: 'The only thing Shakespearean about his plays *is* the language.'[2]

Later in 2015, the language debate expanded to the United Kingdom. Julian Fellowes, whose 2013 film adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* flopped in large part due to its modernized English, backtracked on his previous claim that only a university education could provide access to comprehending Shakespeare. When defending the textual changes to his film, he had stated that he could understand Shakespeare '"because I had a very expensive education. I went to Cambridge; not everyone did."'[3] Antony Sher took issue with Fellowes's comment; and Fellowes backed down, only for Ian McKellen to pronounce that Shakespeare should be seen in the theatre and not read, and Anthony Hopkins then contrarily to urge people to read the plays.[4]

The *Play On!* announcement coincided with the launch of the Hogarth Shakespeare series, a new line of book adaptations of Shakespeare's plays. The project was described in similar terms: the plays would be 'reimagined by some of today's bestselling and most celebrated writers. The books will be true to the spirit of the original plays, while giving authors an exciting opportunity to do something new.'[5] In April 2016, Arden released *On Shakespeare's Sonnets: A Poets' Celebration*, with renditions and responses to the sonnets by thirty contemporary English, Scottish and Irish poets. In both cases, the Hogarth and Arden projects received none of the vitriol heaved at OSF's project.

[1] Daniel Pollack-Pelzner, 'Why we (mostly) stopped messing with Shakespeare's language', *The New Yorker*, 6 October 2015.

[2] James Shapiro, 'Shakespeare in modern English?' *New York Times*, 7 October 2015.

[3] Quoted in Chris Hastings, 'No Julian, you DON'T need a degree to enjoy Shakespeare, says furious Antony Sher', *Daily Mail*, 31 October 2015.

[4] Hastings, 'No Julian'.

[5] 'The Hogarth Shakespeare', *Vintage Books*.

One of the primary reasons that Hogarth and Arden did not suffer from retaliation was that they commissioned translations into non-theatrical genres, and novels and poems cannot replace Shakespeare's scripts for performance. But another factor cannot be ignored. OSF touted that its playwrights for the project were 'more than 50 percent female and more than 50 percent writers of color, [who] will bring a range of diverse voices and perspectives to the works of Shakespeare'.[6] This is in sharp contrast to Hogarth's range of writers. Of the eight authors whose works had been announced to be published through 2021 at the time of this article's writing (June 2018), over 62 per cent are women and 0 per cent are people of colour. Of the thirty artists included in the Arden collection, 33 per cent are women and 10 per cent are people of colour.

All of these English-to-English translation projects challenged dominant structures to recognize translation of Shakespeare into English, and people of colour as qualified translators. Shakespeare studies has largely embraced the global – with Global Shakespeares investigating Shakespeare in non-English-speaking countries – but it retains a distance from the diversified local. Pollack-Pelzner writes, 'What is genuinely radical in [OSF's] commission is not the process but the people involved',[7] referencing the diversity of the playwrights. From Stephen Greenblatt, who reminisced that he fell in love with Shakespeare 'not through the charm of performance but through the hallucinatory power of his language',[8] to Ralph Alan Cohen, who voiced concern that 'the OSF project takes actors and directors off the hook'[9] by modernizing the language, scholars designated poetic language as the primary value and artistry of Shakespeare.[10]

But what eluded the public debate was a candid discussion about the relationship of race to ideological precepts about language. James Shapiro closes his critique of the OSF project by lamenting that 'when you attend a Shakespeare production these days, you find listed in the program a fight director, a dramaturg, a choreographer and lighting, set and scenery designers – but rarely an expert steeped in Shakespeare's language and culture'. For Shapiro, the foundation funding the project would better 'spend its money hiring such experts and enabling those 36 promising American playwrights to devote themselves to writing the next Broadway hit like "Hamilton", rather than waste their time stripping away what's Shakespearian about "King Lear" or "Hamlet"'.[11] The five key value judgements associated with the project, or, more largely, with the role of language and theatre in a dominant valuation of Shakespeare, are embedded in Shapiro's closing statement. The role of the dramaturg varies by theatre, production and individual, but a dramaturg is undoubtedly one who should be 'steeped in Shakespeare's language and culture'. In the case of the OSF project, the dramaturgs include Ph.D.s, playwrights, directors, translators, literary managers, artistic directors, MFAs, producers and more, whose diverse backgrounds and experiences offer a breadth of access points to Shakespeare's language and culture. Also, OSF is spending the money of a wealthy entrepreneur who has the power to commission the United States' largest repertory theatre to employ more than seventy people, create a canon of modern work and influence theatre across the country (if not later the world), as several theatres have already committed to producing some of the translations. Although wealthy patrons have sponsored the arts from the Greeks through Shakespeare to now, the

[6] Bill Rauch, 'Why we're translating Shakespeare', *American Theatre*, 14 October 2015.

[7] Pollack-Pelzner, 'Why we (mostly) stopped messing with Shakespeare's language'.

[8] Stephen Greenblatt, 'Teaching a different Shakespeare from the one I love', *New York Times*, 11 September 2015.

[9] Ralph Alan Cohen, 'American Shakespeare Center Director of Mission's response to the Shakespeare translation project', American Shakespeare Center, asc-blogs, 9 October 2015.

[10] Cohen is co-founder of the American Shakespeare Center (ASC). In April 2017, the ASC announced their 'Shakespeare's New Contemporaries' contest, commissioning thirty-eight fan-fiction plays and awarding $25,000 and a staging for each winner. Shapiro proclaimed his support for this rival initiative in various public announcements.

[11] Shapiro, 'Shakespeare in modern English?'

ethical question and capitalist paradigm of accepting not just funding, but the idea and direction for a project itself, from someone, based merely on their ability to pay for it, has warranted little discussion in comparison to the desire to protect Shakespeare's plays from translation.

Shapiro characterizes the translators as 'promising', as many in fact are up-and-coming playwrights. But it remains a curious term for the thirty-eight writers who together have received over eighty playwriting awards, plus a myriad of others for directing, translating, producing and beyond, and it illustrates how contemporary American playwrights are valued when compared to standard-bearers such as Shakespeare. Further, his suggestion that they write 'the next Broadway hit like "Hamilton"' refers to a show that has achieved greater theatrical and financial success than any single Shakespeare production, recently winning eleven Tony awards and the Pulitzer Prize. It is a tale of one of the Founding Fathers, penned by a Latino, and performed by the most diverse cast on Broadway through a mixture of musical genres that include rap, soul, and R&B. But what is commercially advertised, popular, on Broadway, and, most critically, inclusive, diverse, and 'ethnic', seems at odds with Shapiro's esteem of Shakespeare's language and the historical legacy of white-dominated American Shakespearian performance, and Shapiro's phrasing relegates it to a lower level of importance. Finally, Shapiro devalues the rigor and creativity involved in translation, arguing that the playwrights will waste 'their time stripping away' Shakespeare's language, rather than achieve their task of creating an original aesthetic for the dialogue. His statement follows Stanley Wells's implication that translation involves simplification – that 'to dilute some of Shakespeare's complexities would be like simplifying Bach's counterpoint'.[12]

One place where these issues have been unfolding for the past few decades is in the genre of hip hop Shakespeares. Hip hop is more than a musical style used to adapt Shakespeare, it is also a visual and phenomenological experience, resulting in an innovative way of encountering the text. A close look at the most successful hip hop Shakespearian production illuminates a cultural moment in which aurality confuses the traditional definitions and recognition of the Other. The Q Brothers' *Othello: The Remix* is a hip hop version of Shakespeare's *Othello* that premiered in 2012 and introduced the genre of hip hop Shakespeares to the world stage. The Q Brothers, named for Gregory and Jeffrey Qayium (GQ and JQ), began adapting Shakespeare's plays into full-length musicals nearly twenty years ago. It is through the employment of hip hop as both performance genre and subject matter that *Othello: The Remix* utilizes a Shakespearian story to loosen the perceived equation of hip hop and black culture. The Q Brothers' *Othello: The Remix* illuminates Shakespeare as a viable conduit for breaking down stereotypes of hip hop, and hip hop storytelling as a device to complicate ideas about Shakespeare and race.

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Othello: The Remix was the American contribution to the 2012 Globe to Globe Festival, a theatre festival that brought together thirty-eight theatre companies from around the world to perform all of Shakespeare's plays. Similar to OSF's *Play On!*, the Globe to Globe Festival established a set of rules for the participants, with language restrictions integral to the design of the festival. Only the Globe players were given the freedom to claim the stage by employing the use of spoken English, as the festival mandated that all other theatre companies translate Shakespeare's plays, thereby removing the element that critics of *Play On!* claimed was the very essence of Shakespeare. *Henry V* by the Globe actors was the only play in spoken English heard on the Globe stage during the festival, re-normalizing British Shakespearian performance through its proprietary claim on the English language. The United Kingdom's other production, *Love's Labour's Lost*, was performed in British Sign Language, while the production of *Troilus and Cressida* from English-dominant New Zealand was performed in the

[12] Stanley Wells, Twitter, 15 September 2016.

indigenous language of Maori. The Globe to Globe mandated that each company use a language other than English, thus in order to invite an American troupe, hip hop was deemed a 'language', although it was the only language in the festival that is not recognized by linguists as such.

But hip hop is more than a language; it is also a contested discursive strategy that carries the legacies of African folk storytelling, New York DJs and graffiti artists of Latinx and Latin descent,[13] urban vernacular and, most recently, global corporate culture. Thematically, hip hop often includes critiques of stereotypes of absent fathers and junkie mothers, gangs, and references to 'ghetto life'. Hip hop is also a performance style, one that references a visual component that cannot be made distinct from its language and sound. In his study of hip hop performativity, Christopher Holmes Smith argues that hip hop aurality has an 'inherently visual capacity'.[14] To view hip hop as merely a language is to posit that the Q Brothers' work is solely a linguistic translation, while not acknowledging the performance style, which can have repercussions for the affective response to hip hop. Scholar Marcus Tan writes, 'In other words, considering sound/music as language, while useful, inhibits one's ability to evaluate sound/music as a phenomenological experience.'[15] The rhythm, shared lines and beat boxing that contributed to the aural soundscape of *Othello: The Remix* were interwoven with the graffiti walls, costuming and choreography that made this production hip hop both aurally and visually.[16] Hip hop is aural and visual, and it is racially charged. So, what then is hip hop Shakespeare?

The genealogy of hip hop Shakespeares is composed of five intersecting threads. The first descends from within the academy, largely instigated by white, male scholars attempting to use hip hop as a point of accessibility for teaching Shakespeare. Examples of pedagogical tools include Sitomer and Cirelli's 2004 book *Hip Hop Poetry and the Classics*, and Flocabulary's 2007 compact disc endorsed by Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespeare is Hip-Hop*.[17] More recently, entrepreneurs have picked up where the scholars left off. Jacob Salamon and Jared Bauer formed the company Wisecrack in 2012 and created *Thug Notes*, a series of YouTube videos that showcase African American comedian Greg Edwards as 'Sparky Sweets, PhD', who raps summaries of literature from Dr Seuss to Jane Austen, as well as a number of Shakespeare plays.

The second is from black artists who rap Shakespeare to demonstrate both mastery and appropriation of *the* white status symbol in an effort to empower black youths. This type of advocacy work is referred to as 'Hood Work', and 'involves educational and prosocial messaging for youths that are enacted within and through hip-hop'.[18] Black artists who use Shakespeare in this manner include British rapper Akala, who founded The Hip-hop Shakespeare Company (THSC) in 2008, and New York's The Sonnet Man (Devon Glover).

The third takes the form of theatre outreach programmes and workshops, as well as summer camps run by practitioners to engage teenagers. Outreach programmes include Hartford's Breakdancing Shakespeare, started in 2006, which offers an annual funded six-week intensive summer course. These

[13] Although hip hop is strongly associated with black culture, Latinxs were prominent rappers and DJs in the early stages of hip hop. See Juan Flores, 'Puerto rocks: rap, roots, and amnesia', in *That's the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York, 2012), pp. 74–91. D. G. Kelley also notes that the first prominent hip hop graffiti artist was of Greek descent, in D. G. Kelley, 'Foreword', in *The Vinyl Ain't Final: Hip Hop and the Globalization of Black Popular Culture*, ed. Dipannita Basu and Sidney J. Lemelle (London, 2006), pp. xi–xvii.

[14] Christopher Holmes Smith, 'Method in the madness: exploring the boundaries of identity in hip hop performativity', *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture* 3 (October 1997), 345–74; p. 345.

[15] Marcus Tan, *Acoustic Interculturalism* (New York, 2012), p. 36.

[16] The 'four elements' of hip hop include DJing, MCing, graffiti and breaking, as defined by Tricia Rose in her seminal work on rap. See Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, 1994), p. 34.

[17] See also Michael King's 2008 documentary, *Rapping with Shakespeare*, regarding this type of pedagogy.

[18] Murray Forman, 'Hood work: hip-hop, youth advocacy, and model citizenry', *Communication, Culture & Critique* 6 (2013), 244–57; p. 245.

three strands of engagement converge in the desire for a cutting-edge pedagogy that is predicated, to some extent, on the idea that Shakespearian language requires a 21st-century musical conduit to be understood by young people.

The fourth is from black theatres or repertories that pen a cultural adaptation of a Shakespearian play that includes hip hop, such as *Revenge of a King* (*Hamlet*) in Phoenix in 2009 and *Macbreezy* (*Macbeth*) in Los Angeles in 2010. Finally, the fifth, more recent, is from practitioners who employ the musical genre for adaptation. Theatrical hip hop musicals include *Clay* (2008) and *Venice* (1999), hip hop adaptations of *Henry IV* and *Othello*, respectively, both of which were produced by Matt Sax and Eric Rosen.[19]

Standing adjacent to these threads is the Q Brothers' canon of work, which began in an academic setting through artistic development, not pedagogy. The Q Brothers had their first hit with *The Bomb-itty of Errors* (1999), borne out of GQ's senior thesis at NYU's Tisch Experimental Theatre Wing. At Tisch, GQ needed more than his own original work for his senior project, so he went 'to the master adapter, Shakespeare'.[20] *Bomb-itty* went on to become a successful off-Broadway show, and was followed by *Funk It Up About Nothin'*, which debuted at Edinburgh Fringe in 2008. Post *Othello*, the Q Brothers created their *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* adaptation, *Q Gents*,[21] and stepped outside of Shakespeare for their first time with their adaptation of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, which had its official premiere in 2014. Since then, the Q Brothers' success as professional and collaborative theatre-makers has led to the production of *I♡ Juliet* at Illinois Shakespeare, *Rome Sweet Rome* (*Julius Caesar*) developed with students at University of Iowa, *Long Way Home* (Homer's *Odyssey*) with the Chicago Children's Choir, a workshop production at the Getty Villa of *The Madness of Love Mixtape* (Plato's *The Phaedrus*) and *Ms. Estrada* (Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*) that premiered in New York in 2018 with a large co-ed cast that included none of the members of the Q Brothers collective.

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Othello: The Remix stood outside the norms of the Globe to Globe not simply as a metaphorical gesture to differentiate the American production from the British, but also in that it was the only musical in the festival and the only self-proclaimed adaptation.[22] But the experience of the American *Othello* was more analogous to early modern Globe playgoing than any other production in the festival, with its use of a stylized, fast-paced, contemporary English, dozens of current cultural references, a remaking of an older tale, actors in multiple roles, men (though not boys) playing women, audience address, pre-show musical entertainment, a short rehearsal time, a collaborative playwriting style, and more than enough bawdiness to keep the groundlings entertained for the less-than-2 hours they were there. Though the United Kingdom staged *Henry V* in Renaissance costuming and used the original dialogue, the Q Brothers in many ways provided a more precise simulacrum of the early modern theatre-going experience for audience members.

To adapt Shakespeare into a hip hop musical, the Q Brothers employed a process that retained the pace and order of Shakespeare's tragedy. They

[19] For reviews and analysis of hip hop Shakespearian productions, see Todd Landon Barnes, 'Hip hop Macbeths, "Digitized Blackness", and the Millennial Minstrel: illegal culture sharing in the virtual classroom', in *Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance*, ed. Scott L. Newstok and Ayanna Thompson (New York, 2010), pp. 161–72; Landon Barnes, 'MacB: the Macbeth Project (review)', *Shakespeare Bulletin* 27.3 (Fall 2009), 462–8; Peter Meineck, 'Live from New York: hip hop Aeschylus and operatic Aristophanes', *Arion* 14.1 (Spring/Summer 2006), 145–67; Bradley D. Ryner, 'Revenge of a King (review)', *Shakespeare Bulletin* 27.3 (Fall 2009), 457–62; and Kevin J. Wetmore Jr, '"Big Willie Style" staging hip hop Shakespeare and being down with the Bard', in *Shakespeare and Youth Culture*, ed. Jennifer Hulbert, Kevin J. Wetmore Jr, and Robert L. York (New York, 2006), pp. 147–70.

[20] Gregory Qaiyum, personal interview, Chicago, 3 April 2013.

[21] The Q Brothers' *Q Gents* has now been added to the OSF *Play On!* project.

[22] The production involved a lot of firsts for the Globe. It was the first hip hop musical on the stage, the first use of speakers at the Globe, the first production with amplified sound, and the first time they had a DJ.

started by constructing a direct line-for-line remake in rhyme, using the *OED* and different copies of the play. The first draft retained about 80 per cent of Shakespeare's language. They then translated the rhyme into hip hop, adapting the narrative at this stage of the process. Shakespeare's verse makes only one appearance in the Q Brothers' script. Iago's sexualized phrase about Othello, which he speaks to Brabantio, 'I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs',[23] was echoed in 'You and I know it for a fact / You and her will make the beast with two backs.'[24] But the line was transposed to Iago's motivating speech to Roderigo as a hopeful image of Roderigo and Desdemona in bed. The Q Brothers shifted this imagined visual of a biracial pairing to a uniracial, white one, and, in this rewriting, repurposed it to complicate the association of that line with miscegenation.

The Q Brothers said, 'after going through over thirty drafts, we fight until we are all happy. Absolute collaboration.'[25] Specifics of characterization and the adapted storyline resulted from their process of translating the dialogue from Shakespeare, through the *OED*, and then into hip hop. There were no major cuts or alterations to the plot of *Othello*, but the action was placed in a modern consumerist culture of hip hop performers and moguls.[26] The Q Brothers employed the genre of hip hop hermetically to set the action within a hip hop crew; hip hop culture was both the medium for conveying the story and the story itself. The Q Brothers depicted MC Othello as a black man who had lived a stereotypically 'inner city' childhood, but they did not make this element of Othello's blackness a performed part of the show. Themes and cultural references associated with hip hop were all an (offstage) part of Othello's tale of his past at the outset of the production. Othello successfully transposed his story of overcoming displacement into his financially lucrative mainstream music, in much the same way that the Q Brothers called upon a tradition of undervalued hip hop Shakespeares when they created their financially lucrative show about a hip hop Othello.

Othello was the mainstream rapper, Iago an old-school hip hop artist and the best lyricist; while Cassio was a green boy-band type who prioritized his dancing and entertainment over a sophisticated hip hop sound. Roderigo was characterized as a gamer nerd, obsessed with science fiction almost more than he was with Desdemona, and Loco Vito was portrayed as a shady hip hop CEO from Los Angeles who consistently analogized events to professional tennis from the 1980s and 1990s, and who later had to leave the country for 'undisclosed reasons'.[27] The setting was modernized and tertiary characters were rewritten as comic character roles, and, without any significant cuts to the plot, the production ran a fast-paced 90 minutes.

The Q Brothers created a narrative frame that allowed them to shift between their roles as rappers and characters. The actors entered the stage as performance artists, then shifted to hip hop concert performers, energizing the crowd with 'Throw your hands up'[28] eight times before transitioning to actors who depict a story. The audience participated in the experience as theatre patrons, concertgoers, and sometimes co-creators of the beat, with the performers consistently changing their relationship with the audience and with each other (as multiple

[23] "The Tragedy of Othello the Moor of Venice', by William Shakespeare in *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett, and William Montgomery (Oxford, 1986), 1.1.117–18.

[24] Q Brothers, *Othello: The Remix*, unpublished script (2012), p. 26.

[25] Shakespeare's Globe, 'Unpublished interview with the Q Brothers', Archive at Shakespeare's Globe, 5 May 2012.

[26] All references to the production and script are from the Globe to Globe Festival in 2012 and may differ slightly from the published script (forthcoming). Changes were made following the run at the Globe but they did not significantly alter the dialogue, music, or choreography. The performers were GQ, JQ, Postell Pringle, Jackson Doran, and the DJ Clayton Stamper who mixed the music offstage. When the actors perform as narrators, they will be represented as GQ, JQ, POS, and JAX, respectively. Otherwise, the dialogue will be credited to the character.

[27] Q Brothers, *Othello*, p. 56. [28] Q Brothers, *Othello*, p. 4.

characters and also narrators) throughout. When the plot advanced quickly, the narrators moved time backward saying,

ALL: Rewind!
JQ: Let's do that over slower cuz I think they fell
ALL: behind[29]

The constant fluctuation between mimesis and diegesis invited comedic commentary, and some critics felt that the Q Brothers had not effectuated tragic elements sufficiently.[30] But, more importantly, this adaptation made explicit that the characters themselves are performers. In Ayanna Thompson's new introduction to the Arden *Othello*, she illustrates how Othello and Iago are both successful storytellers, concluding that 'the play teaches us to be sceptical of adhering to one frame, or one story'.[31] Having multiple narrators and narrative voices interspliced with the action, the audience was forced to confront the racialized bodies of the actors as both storytellers and characters.

The most surprising change for most audience members and reviewers was that, following in the tradition of *Othello* adaptations that omit major characters, Desdemona was not a physical character on stage. Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet* (1997) includes male and female characters yet only a glimpse of [Desde]Mona's elbow and her voice only heard from offstage; Paula Vogel's *Desdemona, a Play about a Handkerchief* (1994) consists only of three actresses who portray the three female characters; and Toni Morrison's *Desdemona* (2012) involves only female actors and musicians, who also voice some of the male characters. Although the 1962 film adaptation *All Night Long* (dir. Basil Dearden), includes all of the major characters, Delia (Desdemona) does not 'take the stage' like all of the other musicians in the jazz club and instead performs her song offstage. Thompson argues that *Othello* 'is a play that invites revision',[32] and the omission of characters is a key component of the theatrical legacy of its adaptations.

While each actor took on multiple roles, and both Bianca and Emilia appeared in the show, Desdemona was represented only through the sound of her singing voice. Her backstory was filled in, yet she remained a negative space in performance. The DJ played her singing voice offstage from a pre-recorded track. She sang background for Othello, so when her voice was first heard, it was as an echo of his. As the action progressed, Desdemona no longer articulated words, only sounds. During the final bedroom scene when Othello strangled Desdemona, he said,

OTHELLO: I know you're awake
DESDEMONA: ——
OTHELLO: Don't even try me.[33]

Othello finished the shared lines in lieu of a dialogue between the two characters. The narrators eerily sang the song's chorus in low tones, repeating 'You made your bed', a refrain that Othello would sometimes complete with 'now sleep in it'.[34] This refrain shifted Desdemona's failed defence into the mouths of the male performers. Othello then mounted the sole piece of furniture on the stage, a graffiti-covered musicians' trunk, which transformed into a bed in the imaginations of both actors and audience. Placing a pillow over the invisible Desdemona's head, he smothered her. This moment raised the question of the importance of having Desdemona present at all, especially for her own death. It may seem obvious to lament the visual absence of a climactic scene, but audiences responded with gasps and horror at the pantomimed violence. Death by smothering gained even more traction when it was also the silencing of a character who had a voice and no body.

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[29] Q Brothers, *Othello*, p. 44.

[30] See reviews by Reiss, Skantze, and Yates on the 'less tragic' aspect of the show: Edward Reiss, 'Globe to Globe: 37 plays, 37 languages', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 64.2 (Summer 2013), 200–32; P. A. Skantze, 'O-thell-O: styling syllables, donning wigs, late capitalist, national "scariotypes"', in *Shakespeare Beyond English: A Global Experiment*, ed. Susan Bennett and Christie Carson (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 129–38; and Kieran Yates, 'Othello – review', *Guardian*, 7 May 2012.

[31] Ayanna Thompson, 'Introduction', in *Othello: Revised Edition*, ed. E. A. J. Honigman (London, 2016), pp. 1–116; p. 3.

[32] Thompson, 'Introduction', p. 5.

[33] Q Brothers, *Othello*, p. 73. [34] Q Brothers, *Othello*, p. 73.

The absent Desdemona and the 'sassy' Latina Bianca proved problematic for some viewers due to the fraternal aspect of the Q Brothers' performance and hip hop's history as a male-dominated genre. Some of that critique also had to do with identification; the innocent white victim was nowhere to be seen. Thompson argues that Shakespeare's *Othello* stimulates a desire for agency on the audience's part: 'a desire to protect Desdemona from an unjust death'.[35] In the case of *Othello: The Remix*, although the audience's gasps responded to the brutality of Desdemona's murder, she was not visually present. Compounding her absence was Iago's increased stage time and the fact that the greatest use of direct address was given to Iago and to the actor GQ as a narrator, making the audience all the more complicit in the violence towards the other characters.

Countering Wells's claim that Shakespearian translation involves simplification, which he expressed though musical analogy, the use of music in *Othello: The Remix* accented the linguistic delivery of the dialogue. JQ describes the complexity of having a live DJ to manipulate the two-bar and four-bar musical loops, which requires that the performer land a punch line on the front half of the beat. He goes on to state that the beats are kept as a frame to allow the actor to lead over the music.[36] This type of musical intricacy is part of hip hop, and when transposed to the theatrical performance of a Shakespeare translation, it accentuates the timing for line delivery. Within this hip hop soundscape, musical differentiation was key to characterization: the old-school rap of Iago, the boy-group pop of Cassio and the mainstream rap of Othello. As a language, hip hop is diverse; Marina Terkourafi writes, 'polyphony and fragmentation can be found at its very core'.[37] The Q Brothers' hip hop adaptation included a range of rap styles and some non-hip hop music as well. Emilia's speech about marital relationships was transposed to a post-Motown R&B number, a riff on James Brown's 'It's a Man's Man's Man's World', in which she took centre stage. Here, instead of the higher-pitched voice that actor Jackson Doran used for Emilia's spoken dialogue, he sang in his masculine voice, conveying that Emilia feels 'like an analog girl in a world that's / Digital'.[38] The other non-hip hop number occurred at the end of the show, with Othello leading an a cappella song (that the remaining actors joined him in), entitled 'Love Will Set You Free', about the 'cold, dark, unforgiving system' and his destiny in a tough world.[39] Both of these non-hip hop musical numbers, outside the primary musical genre of the show, solidified Emilia's and Othello's feelings of loneliness and isolation in that world.

Music was key to characterization, but aural differentiation was central to performances of race and ethnicity. For example, Bianca was portrayed as Latina through a Spanish-inflected English rather than a musical style or costume. In addition, the Q Brothers expanded their intricate aural strategy beyond music and accent to language, complicating ideas about race and ethnicity. Othello was made linguistically distinct from the other characters, signifying his racial difference. Through a sophisticated differentiation of hip hop and African American Vernacular English (AAVE), the Q Brothers disassociated both AAVE and hip hop from blackness, while simultaneously making Othello a linguistic Other. AAVE is also referred to as African American English (AAE), Black Vernacular English (BVE), and Ebonics, the last of which is a particularly polarizing term. The 1996 Oakland Ebonics controversy centred on a secondary school board in California that passed legislation recognizing that Ebonics needed to be preserved and taught. Opponents suggested that this move was motivated by a desire to attain funding for bilingual education and that Ebonics was a style of slang. Proponents argued that Ebonics was a dialect, and Ebonics was even

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[35] Thompson, 'Introduction', pp. 42–3.

[36] GQ and JQ, 'Something then in rhyme', Shakespeare Unlimited Podcast, Folger Shakespeare Library, 10 January 2017.

[37] Marina Terkourafi, 'Introduction' in *Languages of Global Hip Hop*, ed. Marina Terkourafi (New York, 2010), pp. 1–18; p. 3.

[38] Q Brothers, *Othello*, p. 61. [39] Q Brothers, *Othello*, p. 85.

recognized by the Linguistic Society of America, which noted the regularity of the linguistic system and the 'grammar and pronunciation patterns' over 'the past thirty years'.[40] As with the Globe to Globe's decision to name hip hop a language to invite an American troupe while keeping with the rules of the festival, language determinations are highly political, and, for that reason, language itself, whether it is hip hop, AAVE, or the contemporary English of the OSF playwrights, is semiotic and must be read accordingly.

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divide between those interested in financial success and those interested in artistic acclaim.[60] The Q Brothers used Shakespeare to tell the history of hip hop, setting *Othello: The Remix* in the era after Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac Shakur had died, and Puff Daddy (Sean Combs) had transitioned to promoting 'more fabricated and poppy' rappers.[61] For that reason, most of the beats were reminiscent of the late 1990s, but they sometimes echoed 'gangsta rap' sounds when Iago spoke.

Othello: The Remix was an internationally commissioned production that told a Shakespearian story through hip hop in order to perform the history of the commodification of hip hop. But it is also *Othello*, and this re-contextualization goes well beyond a mere resetting of the play, to force a powerful dialogue between Shakespearian drama and hip hop. The subtext was that putting a hip hop Shakespearian production on the Globe stage signalled the mainstream commodification of not hip hop, but Shakespeare. The Q Brothers' Iago served as the harbinger of fidelity criticism, lamenting the new popular version of his art. Comparable to the critics of *Play On!* and *Othello: The Remix*, Iago spoke out against the current aesthetic, concluding that what is now popular to a wide group does not retain the complexity of the earlier language and form. This strategy downplayed Iago's racism towards Othello and foregrounded his aesthetic and linguistic concerns. Authenticity and the theme of 'keepin it real'[62] are standard themes in hip hop. Perhaps they are in Shakespeare as well, as he continues to appeal to, and to be adapted and performed by, a wider, more diverse population.

Despite the definitive statement in the Q Brothers' script that Iago was unhappy with Othello because of career suppression, in performance Othello was portrayed by the one African American actor in the cast. This casting caused a racially motivated antagonism to persist. GQ said, 'There is still an unspoken racial element in there. Iago thinks he is a better rapper but he's white.'[63] Although real-life brothers JQ and GQ are half Indian and half German, they and the blond Jackson Doran playing Cassio appeared in visual opposition to Postell Pringle's Othello. When asked about the casting choices, the Q Brothers stated that originally JQ was Othello, 'but then it looked as if [we] were making a statement. We fell into roles, and played to [our] strengths.'[64] Bound by visual conventions of performing race, the Q Brothers made casting choices that propelled the complex racial histories they were enacting onstage.

Racial hatred remained present but ancillary in the character of Brabantio,[65] who was 'set in the ways of a different generation'.[66] Brabantio had the fewest lines and only appeared for one speech, but he expressed explicit racial hatred, harping on the disparity between his daughter and Othello: 'But bunnies don't befriend big bears, it's just wrong.'[67] Following a line that ended with the word 'bigger', Brabantio left out the last word of the next line. After a pause, he said, 'I was gonna say rapper.'[68] Brabantio did not articulate the racial epithet, but both the audience and the characters onstage could fill in the blank.

As racism was not made a dominant motivation for propelling the action, reading race became more complicated. Within a hip hop storyline and genre, the strategy of aural differentiation used to convey Bianca as Latina and Othello as a linguistic Other also led to a question of race for Desdemona. The dependence on sound to convey Desdemona's persona raised the question of her visual appearance, and, unique to hip hop adaptation, the question of her race, though her father and husband referenced it. Brabantio described her

[60] Gregory Qaiyum, personal interview.
[61] Q Brothers, 'Post-show talkback', Chicago Shakespeare Theater, 10 April 2013.
[62] Terkourafi, 'Introduction', p. 5.
[63] Gregory Qaiyum, personal interview.
[64] Gregory and Jeffrey Qaiyum, personal interview, Chicago, 3 April 2013.
[65] GQ portrayed both Brabantio and Iago. This doubling placed the explicit racial hatred of Brabantio and implicit hatred of Iago into the body of one actor.
[66] Q Brothers, *Othello*, p. 11. [67] Q Brothers, *Othello*, p. 11.
[68] Q Brothers, *Othello*, p. 11.

as 'lily-white'[69] and Othello alluded to their difference by what they could produce together, rapping, 'When she singin I'm picturin offspring with skin of cinnamon.'[70] Despite this pronouncement of her whiteness in the Q Brothers' production, the textual certainty of it in Shakespeare's script, and the legacy of performance of Desdemona as a white woman, some critics and viewers questioned Desdemona's whiteness because of the soulful quality of her voice and the very association of hip hop with black culture. P. A. Skantze describes Desdemona as one who '"sounds" black, though in the commercial music moment in which we are living this could be a girl trained to sing black at a young age'.[71] Kieran Yates did not mention Desdemona at all in her review for the *Guardian*, but a commenter imagined her as black – or as not black enough – writing: 'I think the production would have benefited with a Desdemona that combined the sass and attitude of, say, Beyonce, Nikki Minaj, and Rihanna.'[72] These comments reflect how Desdemona's invisibility was offensive from a certain perspective; the whiteness of Desdemona is as important as the blackness of Othello in contemporary performance.[73] In actuality, a white woman, Sophie Grimm, recorded Desdemona's tracks,[74] and the Q Brothers used a white man, then Globe artistic director Dominic Dromgoole, as the visual focal point for the actors to engage when picturing Desdemona. What the Q Brothers' production illuminated was that, in the absence of a white body onstage, the ongoing association of black culture, soulfulness, and hip hop could cause even Desdemona's race to be questioned.

But the Q Brothers challenged this stronghold through their own biracialism, even if it was not legible to the audience. Their presence onstage upheld a sense of elite academic authority (their work began during GQ's study at NYU) while firmly upsetting it (GQ and JQ are first-generation – the group was racially and ethnically diverse, and they didn't attempt to cater to a particular group as pedagogy or entertainment). Terkourafi writes, 'This dual role of *expert/outsider* is often assumed by immigrants and/or bilinguals, who naturally find themselves at the juncture between different communities and cultures, enabling them to function as conduits for the transmission of the genre.'[75] This description applies not only to the Q Brothers' ensemble, but to the character of Othello in Shakespeare's script. Othello is both converted Christian and Moor, lauded warrior and outcast, murderer and victim. Notably, when Brabantio and his men go to arrest Othello, it is Othello who is the Jesus figure, the representative Christian, and Iago his Judas.[76] Shakespeare pushed on notions of typology, making Othello both the standard white and black characters, confusing expectations of race through his story, structure and dialogue. The Q Brothers' adaptation followed suit.

The Globe had reserved *Othello* for the Americans, and there was an implication that American race issues would best be addressed through this Shakespearian play.[77] The Globe designated the language of hip hop for *Othello* due to hip hop's association with black culture, which Othello is tied to in contemporary stagings. But the Q Brothers overturned the norms of racial performance and the expectation of the visual of an American performance of miscegenation. Rather than staging racial tension through the bodies of the two actors playing Othello and Desdemona, the Q Brothers created it musically and aurally, insinuating that Shakespeare has extended beyond

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[69] Q Brothers, *Othello*, p. 11. [70] Q Brothers, *Othello*, p. 34.

[71] Skantze, 'O-thell-O', p. 130. [72] Yates, '*Othello*'.

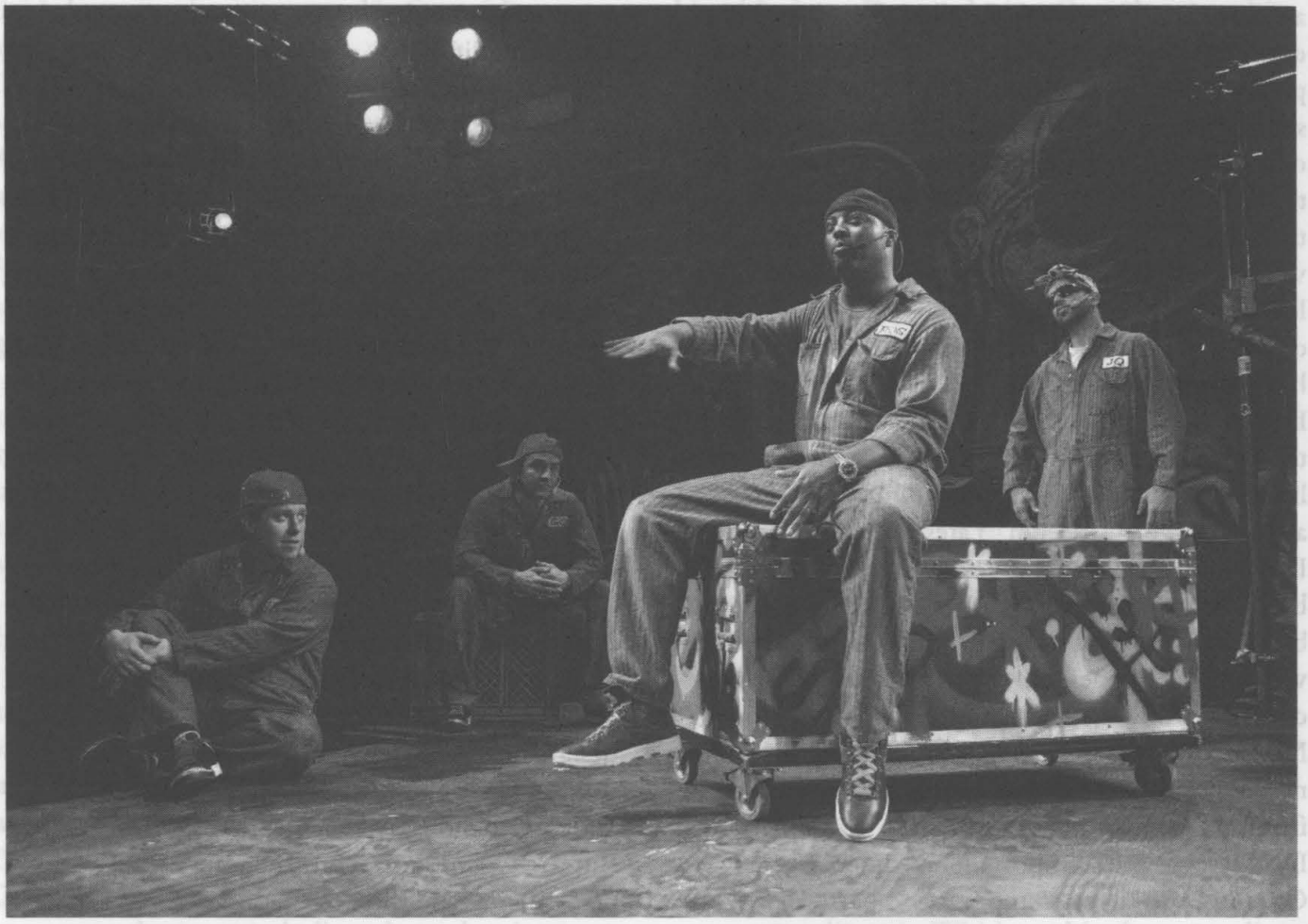
[73] This also reflects a risk-averse attitude amongst primarily white scholars and critics to engage in a frank discussion on the performance of race. Skantze describes actor Postell Pringle as 'Othello-ey looking' and GQ and JG as 'two with less easy to define physical and racial characteristics' ('O-thell-O', p. 130).

[74] Grimm's vocals were used for the Globe to Globe Festival through all of the subsequent runs until the show moved to off-Broadway at the close of 2015, when they were replaced by vocals by Typhanie Monique, who is also white.

[75] Terkourafi, 'Introduction', p. 5.

[76] See Thompson for how Shakespeare subverts aspects of the morality play ('Introduction', p. 10).

[77] Gregory Qaiyum, personal interview.



11. Back from left to right: Jackson Doran (Cassio), GQ (Iago) and JQ (Loco Vito) listen to Postell Pringle (Othello) debut a new track featuring Desdemona in Chicago Shakespeare Theater's production of *Othello: The Remix*, written, directed and composed by the Q Brothers. Photograph by Michael Brosilow.

whiteness and his style of English, as hip hop has extended past racial lines. The spoken word and a mix of ethnoracial bodies onstage made liminal the reading of identity, and thwarted the desire by some for clearly demarcated racial boundaries.

The black body of Othello appeared onstage, but all others around him became difficult for some scholars and critics to read, nodding to a sense of superiority that redirects through infantilizing language and how the complexity of musicality can override sight as a marker. As the Q Brothers' Iago refers to Cassio as a 'kid [who] is just an actor' and that 'he belong in a boy band',[78] P. A. Skantze refers to the actors in the Q Brothers ensemble as 'guys' and 'boys' repeatedly, echoing Shapiro's pejorative use of the word 'promising' to describe the group of OSF playwrights who are largely middle-aged, with some in their 60s, 70s and 80s. This language says, in a sense, that contemporary modes of production are implicitly measured as childish and adolescent, in contrast to Shakespeare's imagined maturity.

Playing to sold-out Globe audiences, *Othello: The Remix* then proceeded to an international tour that the creators of any Shakespearian – or for that matter, theatrical – production would envy. After the premiere at the Globe to Globe, it had a short run in Germany, and it then spent a month at the Edinburgh Fringe, where the actors

[78] Q Brothers, *Othello*, p. 13.

refined the show. It moved to Chicago Shakespeare Theater (CST) in March 2013, where it later won Jeff Awards for Best Ensemble and Large Theater Sound Design. The run was extended through August 2013, and it was also performed for inmates at the Cook County Jail in Chicago, before travelling to South Korea, London and Sydney. In 2014, *Othello: The Remix* was performed at the Gdańsk Shakespeare Festival for the opening of their Gdańsk Shakespeare Theatre. The show travelled to Melbourne, the United Arab Emirates and New Zealand in 2015. In 2016, it returned for a run at CST for the 400th anniversary celebration and, later that same year, actor and producer John Leguizamo took the show to Off-Broadway. The Off-Broadway run resulted in GQ and JQ receiving a Drama Desk Award nomination for Outstanding Lyrics.

Othello: The Remix worked throughout to break down theatrical boundaries in hip hop Shakespeares, causing the audience to rely more on a nuanced listening over a mimetic visual characterization. The interracial origins of hip hop, its global appeal and the perception of hip hop Shakespeares, all point to a bigger issue of how we conceptualize racial division in the world. If hip hop has previously served as a pedagogical tool for young people to understand Shakespeare, this production suggested that Shakespeare could be the necessary entrance point for white culture to learn about the history of hip hop and its mode of storytelling. Describing both *Othello: The Remix* and *Play On!* as translation projects downplays how linguistic translation cannot be separated from a discussion of culture. What both projects point to is the need to embrace the collapsing of suspect assumptions about translation and adaptation, canonical and non-canonical forms, and who gets to adapt whom. Everyone wants to own hip hop, but nobody does. The same goes for Shakespeare.