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Othello and the Ambivalences of Italian Blackface

Abstract: Blackface is a cultural practice that appears ubiquitously in Italian history cutting across the political spectrum; it also lends itself to surprising anti-racist actions. This essay examines the use of blackface from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century by looking at its appearance in popular culture and, contextually and dialectically, at its adoption in selected performances of *Othello*, a play that holds special meaning in Italy because of its famous operatic adaptations. Africa and blackness were often represented in Italian visual arts in the early modern period, but the early colonial ventures of the new independent Italy create a new exotic imaginary that is particularly manifest in popular culture. *Othello* is influenced by new African discourses but it also exists in a parallel dimension that somehow resists facile political interpretations. The colonial ventures of post-unification and Fascist Italy do not reverberate in any predictable manner in the growing popularity of the play. After World War II new forms of exoticism emerge that will be subverted only by a new postcolonial scenario that also coincides with a re-emergence of racism. Against the respective historical backdrops, we examine the idiosyncratic versions of blackface by Tommaso Salvini, Pietro Sharoff, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Carmelo Bene, and Elio De Capitani to suggest continuities and discontinuities in Italian interpretations of *Othello*.

Keywords: *Othello*, Shakespeare in Italy, blackface, colonialism, postcolonialism, fascism, film, adaptations, popular culture.

Paradoxes

In the second half of 2019, blackface made the national news three times in Italy. The national airline featured a television commercial with a blacked-up white actor impersonating Barack Obama as part of their US presidents series; an American soprano refused to wear black make-up in her performance of *Aida* at the Arena in Verona, the temple of opera; before a junior football match, players from both sides appeared with black marks painted on their faces to protest the racist abuse to which an African Italian child playing for one the teams had been subjected to in a previous occasion. These unrelated episodes,

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which elicited very mixed public reactions, highlight the ubiquitous and ambivalent use of blackface. Perhaps, the most striking factor is the repeated use or understating of blackface for anti-racist purposes (one can find numerous cases of solidarity towards black victims of racism through collective blackface since the last century).

In 2016, Elio De Capitani, a well-known stage and screen actor with a recognized politically progressive profile, staged a successful version of *Otello* at his home institution Teatro dell'Elfo in Milan, where he is artistic director. Without resorting to any facile explicit reference to the current political situation and opting instead for a highly stylized set, his production resonated powerfully with the resurgence of anti-black and anti-Muslim racism in Italy during the widespread migrant 'crisis' that Europe has been facing in the last years. Iago was fashioned as the epitome of the resentful underling who vents out against the ethnic outsider, reminiscent of the typical exponent of the Lega, the once fringe separatist movement whose stronghold was traditionally in the Milan region and that was on its way to becoming the largest political party in Italy with an explicit populist, anti-migrant agenda. This unambiguously antiracist production included De Capitani himself in the role of an austere Otello in blackface, an apparent contradiction that we will be examining in detail later in the essay.

We argue here that all of these phenomena need to be placed in the context of the specific Italian genealogies and legacy of blackface, where Shakespeare features prominently both through the criticism and performance of *Othello* and, even more, in its operatic adaptations by Gioacchino Rossini and (especially) Giuseppe Verdi. We are critical of blackface and believe it should be discontinued in Italy as elsewhere. We also share the conviction that blackface (a word that tellingly does not have a straightforward translation in the Italian language) needs to be properly understood and contextualized in each and every cultural milieu in which it appears, as it participates in specific cultural and political traditions as well as specific racilogies. As we try to show, blackface cannot be separated from an ancient relationship between Italy and Africa, and more directly in the colonial and postcolonial phase of that history. In this light we need to carefully consider the analogies, entanglements, and differences from the better known archive of blackface in the United States, where the black/white dichotomy has long been the defining racial determinant. Stressing the need to learn from the African American experience and to cultivate forms of solidarity across continents in reference to 'emergent formation of Black Europeans', Paul Gilroy remarks in his recent preface to the new edition of *Between Camps*:

US-derived specifications of what racial conflict entails are being projected worldwide as non-specific outcomes. Those the North American contingencies

become widely understood as intrinsic to the general workings of racial division. ... My essential point is that accepting this salience of the social and political processes that the US knows and accepts as a nature of phenomenon called “race”, does absolutely nothing to address the multiple mystifications wrought by racism either in US political culture or elsewhere. (Gilroy xiii)

To test this hypothesis on the Italian case, we attempt a broad overview of different historical moments in the last three centuries, looking at representations of blackness and uses of blackface in different cultural domains. We then provide an analysis of coeval Italian productions of *Othello*. The case of Shakespeare’s play is significant insofar as it constitutes a bridge between Italy and the anglosphere so allowing us a precious term of comparison with English and American discourses and practices of blackface that provide the standard context of *Othello* criticism and production. It also illuminates deep anxieties about racial and ethnic difference as they change over time and place. As Michael Neill’s remarks:

Othello is a work that trades in ethnic constructions that are at once misleadingly *like* and confusingly *unlike* the twentieth-century ideas of ‘race’ to which they are, nevertheless, recognizably ancestral. Just as the modern vocabulary of ‘race’ continues to be inflected by the pseudo-biological thinking of the nineteenth century, so the early modern language of colour was indelibly marked by primitive fears that associated darkness with evil and death. (Neill 125-126)

We understand that the amount and diversity of the cultural materials we reference may be daunting, the nexus with Othello’s performances may look occasionally tenuous, and the analysis of individual case studies somehow limited, but we hope that certain patterns will emerge that will suggest continuities and discontinuities in the history of Italian blackface.

Africa in the New Nation

At least since the early modern era the African presence in Italy, mostly linked to slavery and piracy, is well documented. It is particularly visible in paintings and monuments that depict the trope of chained slaves and servants, but also black gondoliers and even aristocratic figures such as Alessandro and Giulia de Medici, whose renaissance portraits show a complex Italian ethnic metissage that was sentenced to oblivion by unified Italy (Kaplan 2010). For centuries the major source of knowledge for Europeans (including Shakespeare) was Leo Africanus’s *History and Description of Africa*, a book written in Italian by a northern African diplomat sold to slavery to the Pope Leo X.

When Italy became an independent state in 1861, it soon entered the scramble for Africa. A colonial enterprise was part and parcel of the building of the new nation and imagined community: the imperial fantasies, aspirations, and violent practices of Fascism were thus preceded by the campaigns of the liberal governments of the new Kingdom of Italy in the 1880s. This political interest gave a particular Italian twist to a typical European post-Romantic exotic imaginary. In 1884 a delegation of six people from the first colonial settlement in today's Eritrea, the bay of Assab (hence their name 'assabesi') visited Turin, a former Italian capital and the most modern and intellectual city in the young nation. The event generated widespread curiosity and excitement, especially because the group was rumored to include a Sultan. In reality the three men, one woman, and two children were selected because one of them was a native agent who spoke rudimentary Italian. Even in the absence of "men of royal siege" they were followed all around town by a small crowd, they were depicted in various lurid illustrations and were described as "barbarians" and "savages" (Abbatista). An ersatz African village was even built along the Po river, which they refused to use asking for more suitable accommodations. The memory of that visit survives in another traditional lieu of African exoticism in Italian culture: pastry. Cocoa- and liquerice-coated cookies called Assabesi continued to be sold today.

In the same decade Giuseppe Verdi, whose orientalist fantasies in *Aida* have been examined by Edward Said (1993) in an essay that provides the best background to understand the recent polemic started by the American soprano, was working with his librettist Arrigo Boito on the "chocolate" project (as they nicknamed it in their correspondence), namely their operatic adaptation of *Othello* that had its triumphant première in 1887. It is important to remember that Shakespeare did not become a successful stage presence in Italy until the second half of the nineteenth century and that it first made its way through adaptations in genres such as opera, ballet, and painting. It was precisely the stylistic hybridization between tragedy and comedy that made it very difficult for traditionalist Italian audiences to accept a play like *Othello* and Shakespeare's final triumph was made possible by some iconic actors. An early and innovative Shakespearean use of blackface was that of one of them, Tommaso Salvini, a star of the Italian and international stages who toured successfully both North and South America. Remarkably, for the Italian patriot and actor, becoming *Othello* involved a sort of exploratory journey:

I read the history of the Venetian republic, the invasion of Spain by the Moors, their passions, their warfare science and their religious beliefs; nor did I neglect the novella od Cinthio Giraldi [sic] in order to better master that sublime character. It was no longer the superficial study of words or of some scenic effect, or or more or less stressed sentences to obtain a fleeting applause; it was

a vaster horizon that was opening to my sight, an infinite sea where my ship navigated safely, with no fear of finding rocks (Salvini 119).

This account, the reference to the Moorish invasion of Spain and his amply documented success with the character suggests that Salvini endorsed the notion of an “Arab” Othello instead of the “black” one that had been rejected in England by Romantic critics and actors. His work on the character lasted for a long time. In 1871, on his way to South America, Salvini stopped in Gibraltar:

I was struck by a most beautiful figure of majestic gait, with a Roman physiognomy, save a slight protrusion of the lower lip. The hue of the flesh was between copper and coffee, very strong, and he wore light moustache and his chin was covered with sparse and curly hair. Up until then I had always represented Othello with my moustache only, but since I saw that proud moor I adopted also the hair on the chin and tried to imitate his gestures, motion, deportment, and, had it been possible, I would have imitated his voice too, so much did that splendid moor represent to me the true type of the Shakespearean hero. And Othello must be a son of Mauritania, if we must deduce from what Iago says to Roderigo: “He returns to Mauritania”. And why should he return precisely there, if the author had not intended that *he returns to his homeland?* It appears quite logical to me. (Salvini 260)

The last deduction is misleading since the text (and the Italian translation used by Salvini) reads “he goes into Mauritania” (4.2.226) and crucially Shakespeare does not pinpoint Othello’s birthplace. It is precisely in this space of indeterminacy that Salvini combined his research work with a sort of ethnographic study of Othello that blended orientalist stereotypes, racist tropes, and genuine curiosity and admiration. If in England the Romantic Othello was toned down to widen, in the age of debate over slavery, an ideologically reassuring gap between the black sub-Saharan African and the noble northern African moor, in Salvini we see a more complicated engagement with and openness to cultural alterity. What is also relevant is that anglophone reviewers (including Henry James) made a specific connection between the racial identity of the character and that of the actor, who in his performances abroad always played the part in Italian even when the rest of the cast acted in English.

We may also remark that in those plays of Shakespeare’s which are founded, like *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, on Italian tales or romances, the development of the story often calls for the exhibition of darker and fiercer passions, more deadly hatred and jealousy, or blacker guile and perfidy, than would be allowed by the tame and placid manner in which we live in modern England. [...] The characters of Othello and Iago, for example, are remarkable as types of some peculiar veins of thought and sentiment that prevailed among

men of different classes and varieties of individual disposition, in the city-republics or principalities of Medieval Italy. [...] As the moral characteristics of a nation, therefore, do not become wholly extinct in three or four centuries, it is probable that an Italian actor of the present day may perceive and appropriate some shades or hues of character which would perhaps have escaped an English performer. (“Signor Salvini”, 368).

This passage resonates with some familiar assertions of Victorian science and culture, including the Lamarckian notion that inherited mental and physical characteristics prevail throughout the centuries. Interestingly, the anonymous English reviewer talks about Italian plays but singles out *Othello* and *Merchant*, and also names Iago as a racial type. When another anonymous critic published a ponderous tome to demonstrate that Shakespeare had faithfully represented the main superior (Germanic and Celtic) and inferior (Italian and Jewish) races in his oeuvre, Salvini’s biographer Jarro ridiculed this racial study by pointing out that if Iago was the true representative of the “Italian race”, Desdemona and Cassio were also Italian (10). After remarking that the issue of Othello’s “colour” had caused “rivers of ink” to be spilled, Jarro also challenged Salvini’s position: the Moor was black, because if he had been a noble Arab he would have certainly proclaimed his genealogy to the Senate. In general, a survey of nineteenth century Italian criticism shows very little interest in the fact of Othello’s blackness.

Perhaps the standard Italian position was summarized by Paulo Fambri in 1884, the heyday of the new colonial era: “the story would remain in any other part the very same, and a whitened-faced Othello to hold the stage would need but the crossing out of a few allusions and the toning down of a few sentences. The psychology would still remain real, profound, most powerful” (Fambri 6). Othello’s ethnicity (like the Jewish component of *The Merchant of Venice*, in a parallel that has been examined by Bassi 2011) was then in turn repressed, allegorized, wished away, considered accidental versus other essential themes. Othello the black was different from Othello the man. As Italy advanced in Africa, it sanitized the African element in *Othello*.

In the early twentieth century an interesting insight into the changing perceptions of Africa is provided by a very particular segment of popular culture where blackface features prominently (Scarpa). In 1908 the first Italian comic book was born, signed by Attilio Mussino on the first issue of the *Corriere dei Piccoli*. Bilbolbul is a guileless, wide-eyed African child who takes literally the metaphors and proverbs that cross his path. In the first episode, having stolen an egg, he turns literally red from blushing and then literally white out of fear. So runs his life: he gets taller, shorter, breaks into pieces and is glued back together, frequently changing his colour. Everytime he reverts to blackness, he is again the innocent child from the colonies. By now Italy had already experienced the

humiliating defeats of Dogali and Adua, the thwarted ventures into Ethiopia, and in 1911 it invaded Libia as part of a war against the Ottoman Empire. Bilbolbul is a typical colonial creature, inviting the same dose of paternalism, patience and whippings used by Italy towards the askari, the local soldiers recruited as colonial troops. His ridiculous clumsiness creates an analogy, if not a relationship, with the American tradition of the minstrel show. Bilbolbul's protruding, fleshy lips, his wide eyes, and an ink-black hue that was toned down with time, make of him a caricature whose connection with colonialism is evident from the very first rhyme with its reference to the East African hut: "nel domestico tukul, ruba un uovo Bilbolbul" ("in the domestic tukul, an egg is stolen by Bilbolbul"). Otherwise his backdrop is a generically exotic one, with desert and cactus. Bilbolbul's blackness is also a mark of rebellion, contestation, linguistic subversion but it also marks him as inferior, in need of a civilizing process. Nevertheless Bilbolbul also invites sympathy and identification on the part of children for his daily vicissitudes, and it is ambivalence that made him be gradually marginalized and finally silenced by Fascism during its Ethiopian campaigns. Other comic books explicitly used blackface, such as Bruno Angoletta's *Giacometto gira l'Europa* that shows the wandering protagonist blackening up to escape the French police and posing as colonial trooper. His ploy is discovered when the rain washes away his artificial colour. In the bestselling *Adventures of Signor Bonaventura* by Sergio Tofani, a milestone of Italian culture from 1917 until 1978, we have an exemplary episode. In *Bonaventura in Parrot Island* the hero faces terrible black, monstrous cannibals and is saved by a little black girl. But she turns out to be a white girl kidnapped by the savages, making explicit the paranoid nightmare of the black man as sexual predator and of blackness as a thin veneer that covers the white skin of the brave, innocent, sagacious white girl.

Little Blackface(s)

Fascism exasperates the early twentieth century orientations towards blackness. Mockery becomes a trend, and the exotic turns into ghastly colonial pornography. Blackness as mark of inferiority is inscribed in pervasive propaganda accompanying the occupation of Ethiopia in the 1930s. Ethiopians were cast as a mass of slaves to be delivered from Hailé Sellasie, the Italian regime's foremost public enemy, invariably described as a stinking, cowering black man hiding behind the skirts of other European countries. Popular songs became a special vehicle to mark black as the color of inferiority and subjugation. In *Topolino in Abissinia (Mickey Mouse in Abissinia)*, a children tune from 1935, the skin of the 'moor' is abject, raw matter used to make a purse

for mom, cover dad's car seats and make gloves for the uncle. Unquestionably, the most famous "blackface" of the Fascist era is the young 'abissinian maid' made popular by the song *Faccetta nera* (Little black face), representing the trope of the young black woman as the figure of colonial penetration, political and sexual. As late as 1969, one of the most famous Italian journalists, Indro Montanelli, candidly explained in a television interview that while he served in Africa as a soldier, he had a 12-year-old sexual concubine: "In Africa it's different", was his nonchalant gloss on the rape of a minor. The fact that the veracity of the story has been recently called into question only adds to the shameless appropriation and flaunting of the "young African concubine" trope as a mark of colonial virility.

In 1934, as we learn from the Fascist censor-in-chief Leopoldo Zurlo, Mussolini was incensed by the recent publication of the novel *Sambadù, amore negro* by Mura (the pseudonym of Maria Assunta Giulia Volpi Nannipieri). This interracial romance was highly subversive because it inverted the traditional gender roles in a modern-day version of Othello by matching an African engineer who had earned his degree in Florence (Sambadù Niôminkas), and a young Italian widow. The relationship was vividly illustrated on the cover where an elegant black man with a jacket and tie holds the smiling white woman, covered by a towel and with shoulders and knees well exposed, her arms voluptuously around his neck. A shorter version of the novel had been serialized in 1930, but in this new version this intense erotic relationship falls apart when Silvia gets pregnant: "The blood of my child will be polluted by that of another race, and will carry with him the savage germs of a negro tribe". The unequivocal racist moral of the story was evidently less compelling than the plot itself (and perhaps the cover) since Mussolini was described as furious because the novel "promotes racial cross-breeding" (Caponi 68).

Blackface remained a recognized practice in film, and its most famous performance on screen was by Doris Duranti, who embodied an exotic alterity in several roles. In Romolo Marcellini's *Sentinelle di bronzo* (*Bronze Sentries*) (1937), she plays Dahabo, a Somali woman who belongs to a clan (Cabila) allied with the Italians. Her name means 'gold' and her skin is painted with a golden brown hue that is very different from the caricatures of the cartoons and represents the accomplished civilizing mission. After all, the most obsessive trope under Fascism was not the blackening of the white face but its perverse mirror image, the whitening of the black skin, a biblical and early modern trope that became the ultimate symbol of the civilizing mission (Giuliani and Lombardi Diop). In 1937 racism was officially sanctioned by the laws against *madamato*—the concubinage between Italian men and African women in occupied territories. The following year the regime made racism a centerpiece of its politics by issuing the Racial Laws against its Jewish citizens, proudly proclaiming the purity of the Italian race. The journal *La difesa della razza* set

out to provide scientific support for Italian racism and anti-Semitism, typically casting racism as a defensive move against the contamination posed by blacks and Jews. As Valentina Pisanty (2006) has demonstrated, Italian racists had a hard time theorizing a distinctly Italian racism, since the peninsula had been historically a crossroads of peoples and the social and economic differences between South and North had been frequently racialized. The result were continuous oscillations and conflicts between a purely biological racism of the Nazi type, and a more politically malleable 'esoteric' racism that conveniently located 'race' in the 'spirit' rather than in the body, allowing the formulation of a distinct Italian race which had been 'refined' over time. In 1940 *La difesa della Razza* published a "Racist Interpretation of *Othello*" (L.D. 1940) where that while insisting that the play dispensed an unmistakable warning against miscegenation, the writer was also keen to demonstrate that such a racist message was not to be credited to Shakespeare the Englishman, a son of that Perfidious Albion which was Italy's arch enemy, but to the Italian Giraldi Cinzio who had provided Shakespeare with the main plot of the play.

Apart from this marginal intervention, in his study of "Othello in black shirt" Caponi observes that the transformation of Shakespeare into a classic sheltered the play from the pseudoscience and racist propaganda fueled by the renewed colonial enterprise. Italy became more and more sensitive to the matter of blackness but simultaneously *Othello* became a "fundamental milestone" for a more innovative and modern theatre (64-65). The play did not make frequent appearances but three major productions triggered a debate between a "foreign" style of directing and the Italian tradition, with very limited regard to the racial theme (87). The most famous one took place in 1933 in the courtyard of the Ducal Palace in Venice, thanks to Pietro Sharoff, a Russian pupil of Meyerhold and an assistant to Stanislavsky who became an Italian citizen in 1938. Sharoff's show was called an "extraordinary open-air experiment" (Caponi 88) and combined the fascination of its historic backdrop with the new methodology inspired by Stanislavski (influenced in turn by his experience of seeing Salvini as Othello), at odds with the histrionic style associated with the charismatic Italian performers. The reviews suggest that the Fascist regime's official spokespersons were less concerned with the racial identity of Othello than with the superiority of the Italian style of acting—"a noble and strong, Mediterranean and national tradition", in the words of Marco Ramperti, a leading theatre reviewer known for his racist and anti-Semitic views (Caponi 92). The play, if not the character, confirmed its vocation as vehicle of experimentation but its ethnic component was marginal, and blackface was used as a cosmetic component that was taken for granted with no obvious political referentiality. Even the most famous anti-Fascist critical views of Shakespeare dismissed the racial themes of the play. Benedetto Croce asserted that "poetry originates only from itself and not outside, from nation, race, or something else" and ridiculed the notion that *Othello's*

message was in “the fate that strikes unequal marriages, between people of different race, social condition or age” (154). From different political angles, in short, Othello’s blackness was once again neutralized.

Avant-Garde *Othello*

As Neelam Srivastava remarks, “since Italy lost its colonies to Britain in 1941, it never had to face the force of anti-colonial uprisings and independence movements, and did not have to operate any form of critical revision towards its own role as a colonizing power” (205). Such “failed decolonization” contributed to the myth of the good Italian, a self-exculpatory narrative endorsed by Republican Italy in times of Cold War that conveniently whitewashed the regime racist and anti-Semitic crimes and cultural practices.

This also allowed the return of blackface with a surprising twist. It reappeared in popular culture as imitation of the American models, with ridicule skits and songs that are reminiscent of the minstrel show. In 1949 “Bongo Bongo Bongo”, a cover of Bob Hilliard and Carl Sigman’s “Civilization”, became a hit sung by Nilla Pizzi and Luciano Benevene. The explorer who tries to invite an ‘old negro’ to follow him towards civilization and is answered that he is so happy in the Congo jungle, took the distinct form of a vocal blackface, with a play on the syntax and the accent of the ‘old negro’ (“*No bono scarpe strette*”—“no good, tight shoes”) that did not exist in the original.

It is tempting to compare this song to the slightly later hit “Tu vuo’ fà l’Americano” (1956) by Renato Carosone, still popular nowadays. The Neapolitan lyrics poke fun at young Italians who mimic the American lifestyle by wearing baseball caps and drinking whiskey and soda, turning their back to local traditions. But while satirizing Americanization and the vogue for Rock ‘n Roll, Carosone and co-author Nicola Salerno combine Neapolitan themes with swing and jazz, creating a successful match between two distinctively hybrid traditions. If “Bongo Bongo Bongo” is an unwitting import of Jim Crow, “Tu vuo’ fà l’Americano” is a felicitous embrace of African American music.

Against these subtle forms of cultural hybridity, the white/black racial hierarchy was reiterated and reified in both high and low culture, especially cinema, even by progressive intellectuals. Mainstream comic actors blackened up frequently in television and b-movies, but one can find more highbrow uses of it like in Michelangelo Antonioni’s existentialist film *The Eclipse* (1962). The young protagonist Vittoria (Monica Vitti) visits her friend Marta, the daughter of a Kenyan settler, who displays photographs of Masai men and women and calls Africans ‘Six million monkeys’. Mesmerized by the pictures, Vittoria, romanticises the natives and their connection to nature to the extent that she

paints her face and body black, wears an African costume and butt dances holding a spear until Marta urges her to stop 'playing negro' (O'Healy 182).

While remaining the unproblematized standard practice onstage, blackface features prominently in two important alternative *Othellos*. The short film *Che cosa sono le nuvole?* (*What Are the Clouds*) by Pier Paolo Pasolini was one of five episodes of *Capriccio all'italiana* (1968). A rare foray into comedy film by the poet and filmmaker whose literary adaptations ranged from *Canterbury Tales* to *Medea*, this metatheatrical adaptation is set in a run-down makeshift theatre where a company of full-sized human puppets performs *Othello* before an uproarious, working-class audience. Drawing on the tradition of Sicilian puppet theatres, Pasolini's mix of high and low replicates both Shakespeare's ability to blend registers and genres in *Othello* (among other plays) and the Italian tradition of adapting Shakespeare plots to distinctly Italian artistic forms. While in the same year Franco Zeffirelli was taking this method in a distinct realistic direction with his successful *Romeo and Juliet*, whose lavish scenography and costumes were inspired by Italian Renaissance paintings, Pasolini endorsed a more experimental approach. He translated a small selection of Shakespearean lines into Roman and Neapolitan dialects; he cast the 70-year-old Totò, a living monument of Italian comedy, as a green-faced Iago, and the 20-year-old Ninetto Davoli as Othello with brown make-up. A working class Italian young man from Rome, Davoli embodied the innocent nature of Italian proletarian youth sexually and politically fetishized by Pasolini. Before *Othello* becomes animated, we see the head of the puppet being screwed on his body. Othello then becomes simultaneously Adam and Pinocchio (himself a Christological figure), an innocent, prelapsarian, naive figure who, in Sonia Massai's subtle analysis, will 'fall' through his discover of sexuality and will be "re-admitted to God's presence at the end of the film" (103). By using his fetish actor Davoli as Othello, the opposite of Shakespeare's older and eloquent aristocratic soldier, Pasolini reiterates an association between primitivism and proletarianism that had a distinct African component. As Giovanna Trento has demonstrated, Africa was a constant presence in Pasolini's works since the 1950s, and featured in both completed and unfinished projects (Trento *Pasolini*). He filmed *The Thousands and One Nights* in Yemen and planned an African *Oresteia* but also a film set in contemporary postcolonial Africa (*Il padre selvaggio/Savage Father*), where in a newly independent nation, an idealistic white high school teacher tries to redeem a young local pupil from the authoritarian methods of the colonial educators, while inviting to challenge his own native traditions (a standard theme that African authors such as Achebe and Ngugi were addressing in their novels). Pasolini writes in his notes on the projects: "It is the prehistorical world of Africa, just emerged to history. Tribal life, taboos, rituals, hatred. We are so fully immersed in black life (*vita negra*)

that characters can speak their own language without any need of translation, spoken or written; the world is so fully their own and expresses itself in their language. But the actions, though in their untranslatable mystery, are absolutely simple, and can atrociously speak by themselves. Davidson has been thrown back into his world, the heart of Africa” (Pasolini *Padre* 321, our translation). Influenced by Gramsci’s discourses on subalternity and the ideology of Pan-Africanism, and in a peculiar combination of anti-capitalist communism, Catholic pauperism, and third-worldism, Pasolini built “a deterritorialized and idealized never-ending South: the Pan-South (Panmeridione), ... a fluid, non geographical *topos* where ‘traditional’ values are used in non-traditional and subversive ways with the goal of resisting industrialization, mass media, and late-capitalist alienation” (Trento *Pan-Meridionalism* 59). This imaginary space connected the subproletarian and subaltern classes of a South broadly conceived as a vast Mediterranean space that included Africa, whose values and mentality provided an antidote to capitalist modernity. In this cultural operation Pasolini envisioned an archaic and primitive Africa linked to the ancient Mediterranean world of the classics but also with the Italian peasant society that the rapid industrialization of Italy had disrupted. But he also incorporated colonial fantasies about the relationship between Italy and the Horn of Africa that his generation had inherited from the Fascist imaginary and, one could add, the older racial discourses that detected an affinity between Italians and Africans and that we found in the Salvini reviews.

Back to his *Othello*, as Massai puts it, “Pasolini used meta-theatrical and meta-cinematic devices to show his audience how to resist the influence of familiar patriarchal and racist narratives embedded both in Iago’s improvisational strategies *and* in the play as a whole” (95) Quite idiosyncratically she locates Pasolini’s critique of “the brutal logic of racism” in his turning Cassio into a victim of the abuse of a group of Cypriots led by a conveniently disguised Roderigo while he is flirting with Bianca. She could have pointed out that the brutality of racism is also inscribed in the vicious epithets used by Iago, Brabantio and Roderigo against Othello in the Shakespearean text that Pasolini translates into the Italian dialects used by his puppets. “That negro/nigger son of a bitch” (the Italian language does not have separate words for ‘negro’ and ‘nigger’), ‘Moroccan’ (a definition that was widely used for any northern African); ‘cannibal’, “you are so black, it looks like you want to eat me!” (Pasolini *Nuvole* 932-966)—Pasolini shows the persistence of racist tropes in popular parlance. But while he takes such an explicit view of racism, he makes hardly anything of blackface. In the playtext Pasolini calls Othello ‘il Moretto’ (the little moor), a word traditionally associated with neutral and harmless figures of black servants ubiquitous in Italian art. But the final scene may reveal a deeper connection with Africa. As Massai observes, once removed from “the

enclosed space of representation, the decrepit theatre” and dumped by a rubbish collector in an open-air tip, the two puppets seem to experience freedom and are “endowed with agency, stoical strength and self-awareness when they linger in the wings” and experience a sort of happy ending in their blue sky and cloud gazing, variously interpreted as Christain heaven, Platonic world of ideas, or—in Massai’s view—immanent natural, mundane beauty (Massai 102). Compare this to the final scene Pasolini scripted for the unaccomplished *Savage Father* film project: “The young African protagonist sees his girlfriend walking merrily careless and some lines of poetry come to his mind: they make something surface, a more explicit hope, a ‘dream of something’, of a confused but happy future, that make a light smile flashing white on the dark (fosco) face of the negro boy” (Pasolini *Padre* 325). The young Othello and the young African boy evoke scenarios of existential and political liberation, but they remain confined in the imaginary realm of Pasolini’s “Pan-Meridionalism” rather than affording any insight into the singularities of African culture. Pasolini unmistakably denounces the racism of Iago and other characters, but unlike Salvini, does not use Othello to look into a different culture. The same ambiguity can be seen in the interpretation of the scene where the audience storms the stage and forcefully remove the puppets, which end up in the rubbish dump. Calling the audience “radically innovative”, Massai challenges views that consider spectators too naive or manipulable, arguing that “the audience is in fact the closest fictional counterpart to the adapter who eats his master to absorb his creative power while exorcizing it” (101). However, this audience that loudly boos at the ploys of the characters and finally remove them violently from the stage lends itself to various interpretations. Are they a revolutionary crowd that rises against unjustified violence? Is it a patriarchal group protecting the honor of Desdemona? Is it an uncontrollable mob? Whatever the case, they do not differentiate between Iago and Othello, finding no reason to distinguish—for better or for worse—between the black and the green/white man.

Pasolini’s sophisticated poetics of innocence could not be farther from Carmelo Bene’s postmodern approach to Shakespeare. This anarchist, *enfant terrible* of Italian post-dramatic theatre who aimed at unsettling all the tenets of tradition and entertained intellectual conversations with the likes of Gilles Deleuze, produced various Shakespearean adaptations on stage and screen, characterized by an anti-naturalistic, anti-mimetic, anti-narrative style exemplified by works such as *Hommelette for Hamlet* and his radical adaptation of Othello (1979), that was also edited for the screen twenty years later (Bene *Otello*). If Pasolini uses the human puppet device to complicate the perception of the role, Bene set out to curtail if not effectively block any psychological and emotional dimension of the play by deliberately deconstructing the very concept of character. His charismatic performance was simultaneously both the ultimate incarnation of and ultimate challenge to the tradition of the great histrionic

Italian actor *à la* Salvini (Bene notoriously played once without an audience making the idea of a one-man show painfully literal). Like Pasolini, Bene's "anti-representational operation on performance serves as a critique of power" (Vittori and Chillemi 82), but his method was the opposite of Pasolini's experiments with popular forms. He pursued highly intellectual techniques of enstrangement such as the dissociation of actor and voice enabled by modern technologies (Bartalotta 63-86). In an interview he explained:

Your theatricality regurgitates and vomits: it is very physiological.

I have never been able to prescind from the body. There is a lot of "body" in my stage work. Voice, oral cavity, diaphragm, breath. The characters have gradually faded away. Turned into limbs, fingers, nails, prosthesis, bodies, pieces of colonized bodies, given voluntariness by the derided I (Bene & Dotto, 1998: 30).

Bene's metatheatrical playtext exploded all sentimental clichés and emphasised the artificiality and literariness of the plot as a constantly rewritten palimpsest. Shakespeare's original text in translation survives in snippets of dialogue and in Bene's interpolations, blackface is literalized as make-up and becomes an active 'prosthesis'.

"Now that he is WHITE and Black—half naked—he can only accept a whore who plays, loving him, the role of the "unfaithful wife"...

It goes without saying that in this intercourse the INNATE HONOUR of OTHELLO'S MAKEUP is tempered (dissolves) on DESDEMONA's pale complexion. Face to face, losing in her kisses, Othello loses his nature and SHE is soiled with DIRT-BLACK: the (grotesque) JAGO-EMILIA scene from part one is tragically repeated.

Even the WHITE of the bed is BLACK and WHITE... (Bene 126)

The make-up turns smudge and is transferred via the handkerchief from skin to skin. When he approaches Desdemona to kill her, his face is totally white ("there is no trace of Othello on his face. He has lost his 'ROLE'.... a bunch of white roses in his arms", 153). Bene has completely separated the act of murder, which in many modern versions is actually represented as a return of the African repressed, from blackness, which makes one last appearance as pure materiality in the end: "then, fascinated, he contemplates his own hand, almost BLACK from the stage dust, and he is, for a moment, absent-mindedly caressed by his own MEMORY, and trying to put his hand on his face..." (154).

In Shakespeare's text blackness oscillates between the literal and the metaphorical, the ethnic and the symbolic, the carnal and the spiritual, the concrete and the abstract, the mimetic and the metatheatrical. Bene takes all these oscillations to the extreme, treating blackface as an exhausted stage

property at the end of its cultural entropy. For Bene Othello's blackness is the pure artificiality and self-referentiality of art and theatre, in which blackface is only a dulled prop. For Pasolini is part of a chain of semantic and political associations: Africa-South-Innocence-Youth-Proletarianism. In both cases there seems to be a self-conscious acknowledgment that Othello is a 'white' character created by a European writer and there is no pretence of realism there. Both Pasolini and Bene focus on women's desire and sexuality, but there is only space to mention this element here. Nevertheless, in both cases they foreclose that openness and curiosity toward alterity that was experimented (with all the limitations of his time) by Tommaso Salvini.

Black Salvini

This survey finally returns to our opening scene in the new millennium, and to a different Salvini. Italy is becoming a multiethnic country, with pioneering postcolonial voices emerging since the 1990s. In 2006 a ground-breaking anthology of short stories introducing emerging literature by women of colour was named *Black Sheep* (Scego et al. 2006), a tongue-in-cheek title that yet betrayed the uneasiness of mainstream publishing in regard to black Italian writers. The enduring ambivalences we have explored in previous periods are condensed in the public figure of Mario Balotelli, the football player who made the cover of *Time Magazine* in 2012.

The first black player to represent Italy at major tournaments, Balotelli's early appearances provoked monkey hoots and a chant that speaks volumes about his country of birth: "There's no such thing as a black Italian!" Balotelli, of Ghanaian descent, was born in Italy and has never visited Africa. The racism continues, even as Balotelli's popularity has grown in tandem with his goal tally for Italy. As Italy prepared to meet England in the Euro 2012 championship, the national sports daily *Gazzetta dello Sport* published a cartoon depicting Balotelli as King Kong, the giant ape's prehensile legs clasped around the top of Big Ben. Amid protests, the *Gazzetta* issued an aggrieved statement: "This newspaper has fought any form of racism in every stadium." Italy may not be color-blind, but a wide strain of Italian culture seems blind to the sensitivities around color. When Balotelli delivered two goals against Germany in the semifinal of the same competition, another leading sports publication, *Tuttosport*, celebrated his achievement with the headline *LI ABBIAMO FATTI NERI*, literally "We made them black," a pun on bruising—and race. (Mayer and Faris)

As mainstream media outlets struggled to reconcile their democratic agendas with persisting racist tropes, Italy has experienced a recrudescence of ideological

racism, embodied by another Salvini. If the attitude of defining political leader of the late twenty-first century, Silvio Berlusconi (born 1936) was summarized in his calling Obama “young, handsome and tanned” in a perfect example of an old-fashioned imaginary, Matteo Salvini (born 1973) represents an openly instrumental racism deployed as political propaganda. As a young leader of the separatist Lega Nord, Salvini built his political career by endorsing the supposed ethnic difference and superiority of the hard-working north of Italy against the parasitic, lazy Southerners. The post 9/11 shock and even more the migrant crisis of 2015 saw him made an about-face and had him join the ranks of many other European nationalist and populist forces. The Italian nation he had long overly denied or derided became his banner: the new enemies were blacks and Muslims, alien invaders prone to destroy the religious and national identity of Italians. The erstwhile champion of a Celtic Padania tinged with green paraphernalia and pagan rituals, turned into a right-wing Catholic nationalist that led his party to a sweeping electoral victory and the strategic position of the Ministry of Interior, where he enforced a racist platform that exacerbated a securitist discourse admittedly inaugurated by the previous center-left governments.

One could definitely read the spirit of Salvini (in his city, Milan) in the Iago staged by De Capitani. This wise-cracking, seductive figure was embodying the populist figure who was gaining ground in Italian politics. Both the typical working class and petty bourgeois voter who feels that his economic and social decline is caused by the new migrant population and the ‘privileges’ granted to them by politicians and the politician who represent their redemption. As Shaul Bassi wrote to De Capitani in a correspondence that also touched on blackface, “Maybe Iago is laughing too much and making the audience laugh too much, giving them an excuse to vent, to release their inhibitions. In the long term, you end up sympathizing more with him than with the overly self-restrained Othello”. The director and actor acknowledged that he was disturbed by the fact that in his and other contemporary productions (such as Thomas Ostermeier’s *Richard II*) the audience was implicitly invited to flirt with manipulating villains and enjoyed that. Challenged about the make-up, De Capitani responded by expressing a typical impatience with political correctness, and played down the relevance of blackface;

make-up is a matter of inefficacy, not of racism. To use blackface, more than anything, is a crutch that has become too short while it was a very effective convention in the past. So we need a gimmick (‘trovata’) to give my Othello back his power [...] if the make-up speaks the right stage language and not that of hindrance, there is no problem, even with the blackface mask. I also believe that Iago’s racism is well connotated—his animosity is not aimed at a Jew like Shylock or any foreigner, he feels aversion towards a ‘negro’.

De Capitani had no doubt or reservations about recognizing anti-black racism as a central element in the play. He even took issue with other prominent European directors who had replaced Othello's blackness with some alternative form of otherness more connected with their specific cultural tradition. Simultaneously he saw no indispensable meaning attached to blackface (that in his case was a very light brown shade that was not accompanied by any 'ethnic' marker in his costume). When he revived the production a few months later he decided to shed that and replaced it with a stylized black stripe painted across his shaved skull.

What possible conclusions can we draw from this partial and arbitrary excursus? Italian blackface is a palimpsest, a culturally ubiquitous practice connected to a vast archive of raciological tropes that by and large posit an explicit or implicit dichotomies where blackness is located in an inferior or subordinate position and the correspondent superior identity is in turn occupied by different subject positions—white, European, Mediterranean, Latin, Italian, Northern Italian—varying from time to time, according to changing political and cultural conditions. This raciological repertory constitutes not only a familiar arsenal for reactionary exponents but also an insidious temptation for liberal ones. When Igiaba Scego and others criticized the use of blackface in the case of the airline commercial or in the football match solidarity, many progressive voices fulminated against the excesses of political correctness. African culture continues to exist in Italy predominantly in the form of consumable stereotypes that are exploited, fetishized or allegorized for political purposes, across a broad spectrum that goes from (neo)Fascist representations of black masculinity as a contaminating factor of Italian identity to the primitivist myth of the African as the last bastion of innocence against the tentacles of global capitalism. The broad visibility of African American popular culture enriches and complicates this picture, as is the growing success of African and African American literatures. Representations of *Othello* are no longer of any interest for racists, which means that in most performances of the play blackface is inscribed in a symbolic order that is broadly defined as democratic but that often replicates the positions we have examined in this essay. From liberal Italy, through Fascism and after the war, the overall tendency has been to play down the relevance of Othello's racial identity. Tommaso Salvini may have inherited the Victorian interpretation of Othello as a north African character, but for him blackface was part of a broader artistic and cultural strategy of studying and understanding the "other" and exploring ethnic and cultural difference. He was a mainstream protagonist of the Italian stage, but his approach has remained marginal.

In recent years Italy has finally begun to address its colonial legacy and postcolonial condition, capitalizing on the pioneering work of historians, on the fruitful dialogue with anglophone critical race theory and postcolonial studies, and on the groundbreaking work of novelists and playwrights (the afrodescendants Igiaba Scego, Gabriella Ghermandi, Cristina Ali Farah or

the white Italian Francesca Melandri, Daniele Timpano and Elvira Frosini, just to mention a few).

As we write these conclusion in the midst of the Coronavirus outbreak, some European public figures have advocated experimenting vaccines on African individuals, confirming the notion that black lives offer disposable bodies, either as guinea pigs or, in its strange mirror figures, invincible “magical negroes”. Even a supposedly neutral scientific discourse is haunted by a racist imaginary. The scientists quickly retracted but their initial statements shows how in times of crisis anti-black racism becomes an even stronger temptation.

In early 2020 the afrodescendant artist Luigi Christopher Veggetti Kanku, a native of Congo who moved to Italy when he was five years old, painted and auctioned off his work *Salvini Nero (Black Salvini)*. By painting the smiling Matteo Salvini as a black African priest, he denounced the xenophobic practices of the former minister by appropriating and subverting blackface. “I dressed him of his own instruments of fear, persuasion, and manipulation, trying to create something that would transform his appetite for confrontation into respect and social inclusion” (Veggetti Kanku 2020). By portraying a blackface Iago, the artist is not only sending an important cultural and political message but also paving the way for new Italian interpretations of *Othello* that face the legacies of Italian colonialism and racism and take the play in new unexpected directions.

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