# Chapter One
# Interrogating Torture and Finding Race

(abridged version of the introductory chapter to my book on $17^{th}$ century stagings of torture)

Antonin Artaud's second manifesto for the Theatre of Cruelty cries out for a theatre that will depict "great social upheavals" and "conflicts between peoples and races."[1] Opposed to "disinterested" theatre, Artaud designed the Theatre of Cruelty to depict and affect not only the "tortured victims," but also the "executioner-tormentor himself." Artaud viewed both as trapped by "a kind of higher determinism" which he sought to alter through the Theatre of Cruelty (102). To usher in this new theatrical tradition, Artaud declared that the "first spectacle of the Theatre of Cruelty will be entitled: *The Conquest of Mexico*" (126). Explaining his choice for the inaugural event, Artaud wrote, "From the historical point of view, *The Conquest of Mexico* poses the question of colonization. It revives in a brutal and implacable way the ever active fatuousness of Europe. It permits her idea of her own superiority to be deflated" (126). Artaud's decision to adapt John Dryden's 1665 play, *The Indian Emperour, or the Conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards*, for the Theatre of Cruelty had an intrinsic logic because it not only depicted "great social upheavals" and "conflicts between peoples and races," but also was "consistent with our present troubled [i.e., colonial] state of mind." The sequel to his popular play *The Indian Queen*, Dryden's *Indian Emperour* contained exactly what Artaud desired to depict: an explicit scene of torture motivated by a sense of entitlement and racial superiority.

Dryden's *Indian Emperour* virtually brutalizes its audience by forcing her/him to witness Montezuma stretched on the rack in full-view onstage. The horrific nature of this scene, however, does not fit easily or comfortably into Artaud's vision for the Theatre of Cruelty. Despite the fact that Artaud's desire to create a link between seventeenth- and

twentieth-century colonial psychologies explains his decision to adapt an early modern text, Dryden's *Indian Emperour* does not exactly permit Europe's "idea of her own superiority to be deflated." In fact, Dryden's play reveals the complexities inherent in constructing racialized identities through staged scenes of torture. How does one control or even predict how the audience will receive the racialized, tortured body, for example? Despite the fact that Artaud imagined the sight of the tortured body would elicit sympathy, Montezuma's body made abject on the rack could nonetheless elicit a number of less generous responses, including fetishization and objectification. Likewise, how does the triangulation of racial constructions affect audience response/identification? Dryden's popular *English* play potentially could have created an environment in which the English audience disavowed connections with *both* the triumphant yet cruel Spaniards and the defeated yet honorable Indians; instead, the audience could have witnessed the events with a distanced-aloofness that would have permitted a feeling of superiority: precisely the affective response Artaud attempted to redress. In addition, do theatrical performances of racial subjectivity in brown-/blackface differ from those by actors of color? The distinctions in these performances, after all, do call for theorization with regards to reception. Dryden's Montezuma was portrayed by an English actor in an Indian costume and perhaps even brown-face, but Artaud never stipulated how his Montezuma would perform his Indian-ness in *The Conquest of Mexico*. Artaud left the performance of race un-theorized. And finally and perhaps more fundamentally, if the seventeenth and twentieth centuries are linked, as Artaud imagined, how can one appropriate and alter these early modern codings of race? What does it mean to adapt a play that has in some ways already formed the parameters for racial construction? In his theory, Artaud sutured over these multifaceted complexities out of a desire to create a

portrait of racial “filiation.” And in his description of the adaptation of *The Conquest of Mexico*, Artaud sutured over the multifaceted complexities of Dryden’s original text in order to create a production that ends with “Spaniards . . . squashed like blood against the ramparts that are turning green again” (132).

In *Racing the Rack*, I delve into the intricate web of complexities that encase the conjoined performances of torture and race in order to attend to the questions that Artaud left unanswered in his theory. It is my belief that explicit theatrical depictions of torture provide the perfect device to interrogate how race developed with contradictory significations in the early modern period: race became both essential and a construction. This book challenges the notion that conceptions and depictions of race are divided into pre- and post-Enlightenment discourses. Instead, this project demonstrates how these seemingly disparate discourses are united by a consistently vacillating construction of race that swings between the material and the discursive. Torture, which operates on the principle that that which is hidden can be extracted through the application of bodily harm, provides a disturbingly relevant correlation for this paradoxical construction of race. The employment of torture, in other words, often stems from the desire to substitute the visible and manipulable materiality of the body for the more illusive performative nature of identity. In addition, because staged scenes of torture invite the audience to see something that is normally hidden – the victim’s tortured body – they allow the audience to ponder the significance of the victim’s body.

Complicating the idea that the application of torture in early modern England signaled an emerging notion of inwardness, I argue that the performance of torture on the early modern stage also demonstrates an interest in the expressly exterior – the tortured, racialized body. The actual employment of torture in early modern England exemplifies the fear of the

hidden thought and secret threat. From 1540 to 1640, when torture was used most frequently in England, heretics, traitors, and counterfeiters were the primary victims. These disparate criminal groups were united in torture because the state feared they relied on a certain covert interiority. One could not distinguish a Catholic from a Protestant by looking at him/her. In fact, Catholics could, and did, lurk undetected within the English population, secretly praying to "idolatrous" images of the Virgin Mary and pledging allegiance to the Pope. Likewise, the traitor, who was committed to enacting seditious plots, could only succeed if he/she blended in with true loyal citizens. And the counterfeiter made a living by creating objects that looked authentic but which concealed forged and corrupt interiors. In other words, the heretic, the traitor, and the counterfeiter functioned by concealing themselves and their actions. In addition, these criminal groups, which suffered the torments of torture at the hands of the English government, were united by their Englishness; in early modern England, torture was used to detect secrecy within its own population. The unspoken fear that lies below the surface of this history is the belief that the heretics', traitors', and counterfeiters' Englishness served as the ideal mask for these hidden, secret, and treacherous motives and actions.

When representations of torture were staged, however, the victims' roles were rewritten. No longer representing the threat within, the theatrical victims of torture were explicitly racialized figures. Unlike the historical victims who supposedly hid behind a concealing mask of Englishness, these victims could not hide their differences: they were Moors, American Indians, and Africans. Characters, like Aaron the Moor in Edward Ravenscroft's rewriting of *Titus Andronicus*, Crimalhaz in Elkanah Settle's *The Empress of Morocco*, Montezuma in John Dryden's *The Indian Emperour*, and Oroonoko in Thomas Southerne's stage adaptation of *Oroonoko*, were all tortured in full-view onstage. Although

many of these characters are depicted as having a hidden or threatening inwardness (like Montezuma's knowledge of the hidden troves of gold), the plays simultaneously highlight the physical materiality of their differences. These figures are tortured in part because of the apparent, depictable, and stageable differences of their cultures, religions, *and* races.

In *Racing the Rack*, I privilege early modern dramatic depictions of torture because, like Artaud, I see the "immediacy" of these "brutal and implacable" texts. These seventeenth-century texts not only seem "consistent with our present troubled state of mind," but also seem to have created the very discourses we use to express, and attempt to work through, these troubles. This project, however, aims to be more theoretical than historical. While I primarily investigate early modern texts, my theoretical interest allows me to venture into twentieth- and twenty-first-century texts as well. I am interested in the conjoined performances of torture and race because I want to investigate how they create and inform one another, and early modern texts provide the first concentrated conjunction of these performances. This is not to suggest that all early modern depictions of torture included racialized discourses/depictions. Likewise, I am not suggesting that all discourses/depictions of race involve scenes of torture. I do want to argue, however, that the conjunction of the performances of torture and race provides the most effective way to analyze the long-standing contradictory constructions of both.

It is my hope that *Racing the Rack* will highlight how performances of torture and race have functioned, and still continue to function, together. But I also hope that this project will provide a way to challenge the conjunction of these performances. Torture as a form of performance entertainment is troubling because it inures the audience to horrific scenes of violence and inculcates them in the false belief that intimacy with members of different races

can be achieved through violence. In other words, these performances signal that racialized characters becomes less opaque and more transparent when they are depicted as controlled and vulnerable on the rack. I will demonstrate how the contradictory formulation of race – as both performative and material – disrupts clear methods of identification while simultaneously enabling a desire for abjection.

Part of the difficulty of theorizing the performance of torture stems from the fact that our language constructs torture as an "act" and a "performance."[2] Our language equates *real* torture with *performances* of torture, thus minimizing the horrors of the employment of torture by privileging the performative aspects of the "act." While critics have attempted to redress this linguistic construction by documenting the history of torture and its public concealment, few have addressed the significance of true performances of torture. How does one theoretically distinguish between these two "acts" and these two "performances"?

While the actual employment of torture privileges searching out the hidden plot, performances of torture re-inscribe the primacy of that act upon a body by making that body publicly accessible. This is the crucial difference between the employment of torture and the performance of it. The victim's body is made primary through the audience's gaze. The audience is permitted to view the *act* upon the body, and often that body is racialized. While these medieval paintings convey these complex constructions, they are not performance pieces. One must examine early modern dramatic pieces to *see* how performances of torture racialize the body.

The stage rack, the principal instrument of torture employed on the early modern stage, provided the ideal way to display these foreign bodies. A quintessentially seventeenth-century theatrical device, the stage rack was only made possible with the invention of

moveable sets. Highlighting their outward racial differences, the rack displayed these foreign bodies in extremely open, exposed, and vulnerable ways. Victims were often stripped of most of their clothing, and if one imagines the stage rack as holding the victim up vertically to be seen by the audience, the intense focus on the stretched and controlled body is even more vivid. The disparity between the historical reality of torture and the dramatic presentation of such reveals a growing desire to displace the focus from discovering an unseen, and potentially hidden, inwardness to displaying a readily apparent, and potentially revealing, outward manifestation. This displacement became central to constructing race in a contradictory fashion. While the threateningly foreign became something that was essential and needed to be ferreted out, something that was not readily apparent (like the actions of the heretic, traitor, and counterfeiter),[3] it also became something that was visibly performed (like Montezuma's readily apparent cultural and racial differences).[4]

But, of course, the racialized foreign bodies on the seventeenth-century stage were not foreign at all; they were English actors in exoticized costumes and various shades of brown- and blackface. It is important to foreground the performative aspects of this early modern construction of race in order to emphasize that race was initially constructed and presented in performative discourses. Although there were some Moors, American Indians, and Africans in early modern England, their numbers were few. It seems clear that most people living in England at the time would not have known or even seen one of these foreigners. All of their "contact" would have occurred in the theatre, if at all. Thus, it is not simply that these performances rehearsed emerging notions of race: these performances created the actual discourses for the constructions of race. While there have been more theoretical treatments of performances of race than there have been for performances of

torture, this area still needs further analysis, especially with regards to the relationship between the early modern performances of race and the modern constructions of racial identity.

What would it mean if modern notions of race, including the conflicting idea that race is both biological/essential and discursive/performative, stemmed from the performance of racialized characters in early modern England? What would it mean if the very conjunction of the "discursivity and corporeality" of race stemmed from the fact that racial subjectivity was first experienced in the English speaking world *onstage*? What would it mean if there is no split between pre- and post-Enlightenment constructions of racial identity? These ideas would not necessarily challenge performance theory, but they would complicate the notion of performance. If race was first constructed through dramatic performances, then the strange combination of "discursivity and corporeality" takes on new and significant meanings. If race was first constructed through dramatic performances, then the difficulty of "authenticating" racial identity would stem from the fact that racial differences were never constructed as being authentic in the first place.

I am arguing that early modern performance created race in a contradictory fashion precisely because it was an act. Thus, race ends up being constructed in the contradictory terms of "discursivity and corporeality": it is a performance, a discourse, but a performance in which the body is privileged. The audience's gaze upon the racialized characters' bodies licenses the materiality of those bodies, but the performance – white actors in costumes and make-up – simultaneously deconstructs that materiality. The pseudo-scientific race theories of the nineteenth century, which constructed race as a biological essence, did not reject or supplant this model: instead, they replicated it by maintaining the strange vacillation between

physical materiality and hidden essence. Biological theories of race, for instance, both privilege and deconstruct race as a visible, physical reality by cataloguing physical markers of race, while simultaneously emphasizing the hidden and unseen essences of race (like blood). Similarly, the desire to authenticate and verify race in these pseudo-scientific race theories rehearses the anxiety about authenticity from these early modern performances. Because race was first constructed in performance, the conundrum about racial authenticity was always contained within these constructions.

The mistake many critics have made in their thinking about race is assuming that race has a stable meaning in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: a stable meaning that is different from that of the seventeenth century. The stagings of torture in the early modern theatre, however, effectively dismantle these assumptions. The use of torture almost always obsessively rehearses the relationship between outward appearances and inner essences. While Joyce Green MacDonald has argued that "the fluidity and multiplicity of notions of what race meant is one of the most salient features of Renaissance racial discourse," I would modify her argument by contending that the most salient feature of racial discourse in early modern England is the contradictory way race gets coded (166). While there are times when the body (and the color of the body) represents the most important signifier for racial difference, this is far from a consistent presentation or signification. There are just as many times when race is signified by something that is unseen, hidden, and/or invisible. This is why stagings of torture are so significant within the theorization of constructions of race: sometimes the racialized victims are tortured because their bodies clearly signify the differences between themselves and their torturers, and sometimes the racialized victims are tortured because their bodies do not reveal enough of these differences. Race does not

necessarily get performed in fluid terms, but it does get performed in contradictory terms: racial identity is both performed and essentialized.

When theorizing the performance of torture, I highlighted the audience's role. The audience materialized the victim's body in a new way: no longer significant for its ability to be manipulated, the tortured, racialized body became a spectacle for consumption. The audience's ability to view the torture was as much a part of the performance of torture as the act itself was. Likewise, the role of the audience is central in the construction of race: the act of viewing the performance creates these contradictory constructions. This theory, of course, seems to privilege the "white" gaze, creating race from the "majority" position. This is definitely the case for the early modern moment I am examining. I am not addressing how (if at all) Moors, American Indians, and Africans in the early modern period constructed and defined their own identity positions with regards to race: attention to this area would require and create a different type of project.[5] I think it is possible, however, to make the case that these early modern "white" performances of race have informed almost all modern views on race. I do not want to suggest that these constructions are universal and/or timeless. I am certainly not invested in denying anyone's ability to self-identify. I truly believe these constructions can be changed. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge how often people of color have consumed these constructions. Although writing about blacks in the contemporary United States, Elizabeth Alexander's words offer a relevant rejoinder. She writes, "Black bodies in pain for public consumption have been an American spectacle for centuries. . . . White men have been the stagers and consumers of the historical spectacles . . ., but in one way or another, black people have been looking, too, forging a traumatized collective historical memory which is reinvoked, I believe, at contemporary sites."[6] Despite

the fact that the early modern English audiences were homogeneous in their racial composition, creating race through performance is something that has been witnessed by almost every contemporary human being. The legacy of constructing race through performance, in other words, has survived beyond the initial English audiences. This is a legacy that we must all confront now.

Recently, the African-American literary scholar Dwight McBride has argued that with the "advent of poststructuralism . . . 'race' and 'experience' themselves become sites of critical contestation."[7] He goes on to argue that "Even in the literary and cultural critiques by African Americans that are informed by much poststructuralist thought, these scholars, almost without fail (and out of political necessity), pause to genuflect before the shrine of essentialism" (166). Thus, McBride locates a tension between the desire for race to be an immaterial construct and an essential and authoritative reality. In fact, a great deal of McBride's book, *Why I Hate Abercrombie & Fitch*, addresses precisely this tension. In *Racing the Rack*, I want to ponder what it means if the thinking about race and racial identity has been consistently contradictory in nature. Is this truly a contradiction, then? Perhaps the very ideas of race and racial identity have been (and will always be) constructed to contain conflicting significations. Perhaps race will always be understood as both essential and a construction, both an essence and a color, both an invisible substance and a physical presence, both an inherent identity and a learned culture. As I will show throughout *Racing the Rack*, notions of racial identity necessarily fluctuate in contradictory fashions. And perhaps that is the most consistent definition one can provide for race. In my mind, this is not necessarily a problem. Nevertheless, it is time to address our society's desire to consume the conjoined performances of torture and race. The problem stems from performances that

enable the audience to disavow the need for torture while simultaneously enjoying the benefits of constructing a controlled, approachable, and abject racialized victim.

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[1] Antonin Artaud, "The Theater of Cruelty (Second Manifesto)," in *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 123. Although taken from different essays and letters about the Theater of Cruelty, all citations from Artaud will come from this edition of *The Theater and Its Double*: only page numbers will be provided parenthetically.

[2] See, for example, a recent press release from the United Nations' Committee Against Torture, in which the phrase "perform an act of torture" is used frequently. United Nations Press Release, 4 May 2005.

[3] A typical early modern torture warrant for a heretic would claim that he/she was somehow connected with a foreign power. For example, the April 15, 1597 warrant issuing the torture of an English Catholic priest named John Gerard claimed, "yt hath been discovered to her Majestie he verie latelie did receive a packet of letters out of the Lowe Contryes which are supposed to come out of Spayne, being noted to be a great intellegencer and to holde correspondence with Parsons of Jesuite and other traitors beyond the seas." From *Acts of the Privy Council in England*, ed. John R. Dasent (London: Printed for Her Majesty's Stationary Office by Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1890).

[4] Aphra Behn, for example, famously remarked that she supplied the headdresses for *The Indian Queen* and *Indian Emperour*, thus signaling that the Indians in the plays were depicted as physically different from their Spanish conquerors. Behn emphasizes the exotic nature of this gift. Equating the enormous Indian headdresses with strange cultural

differences like body piercing, Behn writes, "Then we trade for feathers, which they order into all shapes, make themselves little short habits of 'em, and glorious wreaths for their heads, necks, arms and legs, whose Tinctures are unconceivable. I had a set of these presented to me, and I gave 'em to the King's theater, and it was the dress of the Indian Queen, infinitely admired by persons of quality, and were unimitable. Besides these, a thousand little knacks and rarities in nature, and some of art, as their baskets, weapons, aprons et cetera. We dealt with 'em with beads of all colors, knives, axes, pins and needles, which they used only as tools to drill holes with in their ears, noses, and lips, where they hang a great many little things. . . ." Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko or, The Royal Slave* (1688) in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M.H. Abrams, Sixth Edition, Vol 1 (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1993), 1867.

[5] There are not enough extant documents from the period sufficiently to create this portrait. Some scholars have called for more research in this field, but there are several logistical hurdles, including access to the documents.

[6] Elizabeth Alexander, "'Can You Be Black and Watch This?' Reading the Rodney King Video(s)," in *Black Male: Representations of Black Masculinity in Contemporary Art*, ed. Thelma Golden (New York: Whitney Museum of Contemporary Art, 1994), 92-93.

[7] Dwight McBride, *Why I Hate Abercrombie & Fitch: Essays on Race and Sexuality* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 163-164.