

2017 SAA Seminar: Global *Othello* Abstracts
Organized by the European Shakespeare Research Association
Leaders: Juan F. Cerdá, University of Murcia
and Douglas Lanier, University of New Hampshire 1

Emily C. Bartels, Rutgers University

“The Ends of the World: Negotiations, Transformations, and *Othello*”

What does it mean to treat *Othello* as a “global” text? The play clearly raises questions about race, cultural difference, and cross-cultural contact as it tells the story of “the Moor of Venice.” Over the past thirty years, these questions themselves have served to define colonial, postcolonial, and now global approaches to Shakespeare and his era. But what is the breaking point that turns a play set in Venice and Cyprus, peopled – and troubled – by Venetians, Cypriots, Turks, a Florentine, and a Moor, into a global vision? What do we as readers gain by using the twenty-first century’s framework of globalization to understand the play and its impact on intra- and inter-cultural connections? And now – with the rise of divisive nationalist movements in the U.S. and U.K – how can globally-oriented interpretations of Shakespeare stand against newly thriving discourses of racism and discrimination?

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Amy Bolis, University of Minnesota

“*Othello: The Remix: Creating an Internationally Successful Adaptation*”

The summer of 2012 was an exciting time for London. In addition to its successful stint as host of the XXX summer Olympic Games, the city also welcomed 37 international playing companies to Shakespeare’s Globe for the first ever Globe to Globe Festival. The festival was framed as both an acknowledgement of London’s cultural diversity and a celebration of Shakespeare’s universality, and was meant to bring together performing companies from around the world, uniting them through their common interest in Shakespeare. One of the productions that debuted at this global event was *Othello: The Remix*, written by the Q Brothers of Chicago.

Othello: The Remix is a hip-hop version of *Othello* which follows a group of famous rappers as they undergo professional and romantic trials in 21st Century America. It was commissioned specifically for the festival and includes the Q Brothers themselves among its five-person ensemble.

But this theatrical debut wasn’t the end of the play’s circulation, due to the production’s overwhelmingly positive reception. Not only did *Othello: The Remix* represent the United States at this event, but it was deemed “one of the Globe to Globe Festival’s greatest successes,” where it was the first of the 37 shows to sell out, and was allotted three performances as opposed to the standard two (Sullivan 153). The fact that this production then traveled to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, enjoyed an extended run at The Chicago Shakespeare Theater, and was subsequently performed in Neuss, Daejeon, Gdansk, Auckland, Sydney, Melbourne, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and New York is a testament to the play’s popularity.

In my paper, I hope to trace the circulation of *Othello: The Remix* from its inception to its most recent performance, addressing such questions as: How did the fact that the play was commissioned specifically for the Globe to Globe Festival impact its creation and reception? What elements of the play fostered such extended international interest in this adaptation? How

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do the various audiences that the play was performed for help us to better understand it? For example, the inmates of the Cook County Jail in Chicago versus the Globe to Globe festival attendees? And finally, what messages about race and gender was the production circulating during its international tour, and how should we read these messages in a time when such subjects are becoming increasingly at the forefront of our consciousness?

Adapting *Othello* for a modern audience is a challenging task, so it is important to interrogate what made *Othello: The Remix* so popular globally and why.

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Brinda Charry, Keene State College

“*Don Cosmuro* — A Brazilian *Othello*”

It was a 19th-century commonplace that if Shakespeare had lived in the Victorian age, he would have written novels. The tradition of novelizing Shakespeare dates back at least to the set of mid-19th-century novellas collectively titled *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* by Mary Cowden Clarke and among the most recent of Shakespeare inspired novels are those published as part of the Hogarth Shakespeare Project. I will begin with a brief consideration of what it means to novelize Shakespeare and what the novel form does to and for Shakespeare's plays. I then turn to Brazilian novelist Machado de Assis's *Don Casmurro* (1899). *Don Cosmuro* is among the first “New World” novelistic adaptations of *Othello*. de Assis, among the best-known of 19th-century Brazilian authors, was himself of mixed race and partially descended from slaves. The *Othello* of the play is white however, an aristocrat whose wealth is at least partly derived from his family's ownership of slaves. The relationship between races is only casually referred to in the novel and it is the subtleties of class status in turn-of-the-century Rio de Janeiro that inform the relationships in the play. This shift from race to class is partly why the author can write his *Othello* as a self-conscious, ironic hero, brooding and pitiful perhaps, but not entirely tragic hero material. This, and the debt to Shakespeare in general, also makes the play an interesting example of Brazilian realism following in the footsteps of the European realism of Flaubert and Balzac. Making *Othello* realistic requires the psychologizing of Shakespeare, an exploration of character, emotion, and motive. Even as he follows this convention of psychological realism, de Macchis's ironic, playful style also precedes modernism and even post-modernism, and that too is largely a result of adapting Shakespeare.

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William Germano, Cooper Union

“The Sound of D in *Othello*”

In his much read 1988 essay on the play, Joel Fineman proposed that “the Sound of O in *Othello*” – semiotic marker, lexical sign, acoustic event – pointed us to the vacuity of nothing embedded in the name of Shakespeare's title character. The essay has fueled many Lacan-tinged

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interpretations of this tragedy, readings in which Othello's thundering cries are soundless and his military body an exploded shell.

Such approaches to Shakespeare reinforce theatrical engagements with sound and psychology -- silent rage, the unheard howl, the inner storm on the heath -- or, in other words, the acoustics of metaphor, and the metaphor of acoustics.

In many ways, Shakespearean interest in sound is regularly divorced from music, or rather treatments of music *in* Shakespeare (early music performance practice, for example) are segregated from poetic considerations of linguistic music, metrics, euphony, and so on. (Fineman's vertigo-inducing analysis might be thought of as a close reading of a musical score that Shakespeare never quite wrote.)

But what about a fully musicalized Shakespeare? Fewer studies of Shakespeare engage the problematic but exhilarating register of real sound as presented to us on a grand scale. Shakespearean operas present us with just that exhilaration and dilemma: what are we hearing? and how much of it is Shakespeare anyway?

For this seminar on global approaches to *Othello* I want to look at how the play is experienced globally through large-scale musical adaptations -- not only the two great 19C Italian operas (Rossini, Verdi) but other treatments (a Tejana Desdemona in a recent American chamber opera, for example).

I'm interested in stagings and interpretations in relation to cultural surroundings, but as my title suggests, I'll be specifically looking at the sounds Desdemona makes in order to think about what might be elsewhere in *Othello*, both play and name.

Regarding the suggested readings, I take particular note of Juan Cerdá's trope of "double foreignness" and Alexa Huang's caution about vacuums in the archive (Shakespearean opera is the domestic Herne's Oak, if not the exotic elephant, in the room of Shakespearean criticism). Sonia Massai reminds us of Barbara Hodgdon's wise caution that adaptation and appropriation are "slippery" -- these are contingent labels, after all -- and operatic Shakespeare is slippery indeed.

I would add, though, that my paper is very deliberately situated within European and North American cultural performance. It's what I work on. But I'd note the global is no less "slippery" a term than, say, "adaptation." The concept of always being foreign -- once, twice, or maybe multiple times -- is, at least for me, a generative idea I hope to explore further. Perhaps nothing is more alien, and more global, than a theatrical world in which the singing voice replaces the spoken voice. I'll begin there.

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Keith Jones, University of Northwestern, St. Paul

“Shakespeare under Apartheid: Janet Suzman's *Othello*”

In 1987, seven years before the abolition of Apartheid, Janet Suzman directed a production of *Othello* for the Johannesburg Market Theatre. Black South Africans and White South Africans watched the performances together—often with considerable tension in the air.

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The play was straightforward; it was set in Venice and Cyprus, not in contemporary South Africa. But the venue, the time, the place, and the cast combined to produce a political statement of the clearest kind.

In the liner notes for the DVD, Suzman neatly articulates the implications of the production: The story of a mixed marriage systematically destroyed, when you analyze it, on a mere whim, seemed to embrace the larger context of South Africa just perfectly.

By examining the way that particular production explored the racial tensions of contemporary South Africa, I hope to see how Shakespeare in general and *Othello* in particular can elicit responses to and conversation about global racial tensions.

Suzman's production does not provide a simple allegory of disharmony between black and white in South Africa—John Kani's *Othello* does not exactly embody Black South Africa, nor does Joanna Weinberg's *Desdemona* stand in for White South Africa. But the production does play with the stereotypes brought to the production by some of the characters (if not some of the audience members). For example, when *Othello* responds to Brabantio's accusations by delivering the line "This only is the witchcraft I have us'd" (I.iii.169), he mimes something like throwing bones. He mocks the idea either that he would be involved in such "witchcraft" or that it would be efficacious even if he had. The accusation of witchcraft is raised and dispelled, but it still lingers.

The production uses Shakespeare to explore contemporary questions about race and race relations, and not in a naïve, simplistic fashion. All the same, the production offers hope for reconciliation—and the reactions of its various audiences underscore the complexity of the issues.

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Erin Kathleen Kelly, Rutgers University

“*Othello* in Japan: Translation, Adaptation, and the Performance of Identity”

By adopting the voice of the original speaker, the translator subordinates his voice and subjectivity to the words of the original, and thereby “renders conspicuous the operation of framing in the process of the constitution of subjectivity in enunciation” according to Naoki Sakai. In this sense, translation is a kind of role-playing, where the identity of the speaker is fragmented among many different voices. In order to make a translation effective, one must inhabit both the language and culture of the original and that of the target audience.

Translators inhabit multiple roles, languages, and cultures, and so does “the Moor”—a mutable term, even for *Othello* himself. Shakespeare's play exposes cultural identity and cross-cultural exchange as a contingent construction and a performance. By focusing on productions and translations of *Othello* in early 20th century Japan, I will explore the irony of utilizing traditional Western motifs to assert Japan's membership among modern (which often reductively means Western) nations, and ultimately, the way these adaptor-translators engaged with, and simultaneously challenged the prevailing stageist narratives that posit Western-ness as a necessary precondition of modernity. Just as translation demonstrates the arbitrariness of terms like “traditional” and “Western” and reveals the heterogeneity of modernity, so too does *Othello*

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manipulate his ethnic identity to either increase his appeal or criticize himself, thereby revealing the tenuousness of early “modernity.”

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Maya Mathur, University of Mary Washington

“*Kaliyattam* and *Omkara*: Indian *Othellos* with a Side of Shakespeare”

Adaptations of Shakespeare have been available to Indian audiences from the nineteenth century onwards when the first theaters were established in Calcutta and Bombay. However, these English-language theaters speak to only one piece of the puzzle; the other is represented by the indigenous theaters in which Shakespeare’s plays were adapted to local languages and contexts. The two films that I examine – Jayaraj’s *Kaliyattam* (1997) and Vishal Bhardwaj’s *Othello* (2006) – are modern incarnations of the latter tradition. On the surface, these films have little in common. *Kaliyattam* is in Malayali, a language spoken in the South Indian state of Kerala; it situates its *Othello* among a troupe of lower-caste *theyyam* dancers, whose performance conventions may be unfamiliar to audiences outside the region; and has limited circulation to audiences outside the region. In contrast, *Omkara* is a large-scale Bollywood production in Hindi, the language spoken by a majority of Indians; is informed by the cinematic traditions of the American Western and gangster film; and is easily available to audiences outside India. In the parlance of *World-Wide Shakespeares*, if *Kaliyattam* is a local Shakespeare for local audiences, then *Omkara* speaks to national and international ones. What the two films do share, however, is an interest in exploring caste discrimination instead of racial conflict and of doing so through the cinematic convention of the family, which is closely associated with Indian adaptations of Western texts. In this paper, I examine the ways in which the protagonists of both films are deliberately located within the family and then excluded from it.

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Alfredo Michel Modenessi, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

“Si, questa è la gelosia!”: Shakespeare, Rancheras & Tango, or the Roots of *Huapango*”

Iván Lipkies’ film *Huapango*, a Mexican *Othello* released in 2003, has been well received in Shakespearean circles. However, it remains either hardly known or severely underestimated in its (my) original country. As I have said elsewhere, this neglect stems from sundry forms of prejudice that are deeply ingrained in Mexican culture and were just as strongly represented and nurtured by the social and gender stereotypes that ruled over the “Golden Age” of Mexican film (roughly 1940-1970). *Huapango* makes a firm case against such stereotypes on the basis of a particular grasp of Shakespeare’s text and a general intelligence of the historic flaws that plague Mexican narratives of love to this day.

As I hope to show in this paper, however, at the root of this successful critique also stand two films specifically connected to *Othello*, in contrasting fashion. One is the little known *Bodas*

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trágicas (“A tragic wedding”, 1946), a “*drama ranchero*” directed by Gilberto Martínez-Solares and written by Mauricio Magdaleno, which obviously derives from Shakespeare’s text — even though it is ludicrously credited only as “based on a classic drama” — and must have just as evidently been a direct source for Lipkies’ film. The very famous other is *Él* (“He”, 1953), an urban drama directed by Luis Buñuel and written by him with Luis Alcoriza from a novel by the sadly overlooked Mercedes Pinto. Buñuel’s classic is a superb portrait of “the jealous kind” that, although often just whimsically associated in conversation with *Othello*, features a sequence arguably pertaining to *Huapango* and, perhaps, indeed somehow to Shakespeare’s own chronicle of one “who loved not ... too well”. I hope, too, that the admittedly cryptic references to tango and Italian lyrics in my title will become clear sometime in early 2017.

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Sabine Schülting, Freie Universität Berlin

“Who is Othello?”

Othello c’est qui?, a performance directed by the duo Gintersdorfer / Klaffen and starring Franck Edmond Yao (an actor from Côte d’Ivoire) and Cornelia Dörr (a German actress), premiered in Hamburg in 2008. It takes its point of departure from Yao’s question “Othello, c’est qui?”, asserting his own and his African friends’ ignorance of Shakespeare’s “Moor of Venice”. Yao wonders: Why does everyone in the West seem to know Othello? Why have the very same words been spoken for 400 years? Why should he, as a black man, be interested in this Othello? Why is this Othello a very important role, as director Monika Gintersdorfer has claimed? Dörr seeks to explain, defending the classics and offering a detailed introduction to Shakespeare’s play. But what starts as a good-humoured banter between the two turns into an increasingly aggressive debate about the theatre as well as about cultural values and cultural stereotypes, in which the two come to reduplicate the constellation between Othello and Desdemona. This encounter across cultural and gender differences is underscored by linguistic differences: Yao speaks French whereas Dörr speaks German (in the performances in Germany). She translates Yao’s words, thus acting as a mediator between him and the audience. A similar ambivalence between difference and connection applies to the bodily interaction of the two, who reiterate the movements, gestures, and steps of the other without copying them. Yao and Dörr are affecting but never fully controlling each other. Without coming to a final agreement or closure, the performance explores the blurry boundary between dramatic figure and cultural identity or identification, and it draws attention to the impact of Shakespearean drama on cultural stereotyping. Shakespeare’s universality is thoroughly debunked and neither the Shakespearean play nor its contemporary adaptation offer an easy solution to racism, sexism, and cultural conflict. On the contrary, the belief that it may do so is presented as a Western fantasy. In my paper, this performance and the questions it evokes will provide the basis for a discussion of the problems and potential pitfalls of “globalizing” *Othello*.