Anna-Claire (Simpson) Steffen

"The matter of mine innocence": White Sophistry and the Power of Fragile Childhood

My paper will explore how white racial argumentation takes shape in Shakespeare's plays through his representations of children's rhetoric and performance. In the spirit of thinking through white sophistry, I consider how children in Shakespeare self-consciously display powerful vulnerability to rhetorically construct white innocence. My framework takes into account how educational reformers such as Erasmus, Ascham, and Kempe wrote about the connection between innocence (coded in their writing as white) as a quality belonging to certain children as speakers (public and otherwise) which makes them particularly effective as rhetoricians. For the time being, my paper will focus primarily on Prince Arthur's powerful tears in his interaction with and characterization of Hubert in Shakespeare's *King John* (and George Peele's *Troublesome Reign of King John)*, and on Prince Henry's tears at the play's end. I may, however, write across a few Shakespeare plays as February nears. Aside from the primary texts of educational reformers mentioned, and the scholars identified in the seminar description email (Smith, Grier and Little), I would also suggest Kimberly Anne Coles' *Bad Humor: Race and Religious Essentialism in Early Modern England (2022)*, Mathieu Chapman's *Anti-Black Racism in Early Modern English Drama: The Other "Other"*, and Urvashi Chakravarty's *Fictions of Consent: Slavery, Servitude, and Free Service in Early Modern England (2022)*.

This essay dwells upon a strange turn of phrase in Shakespeare's King Lear. Before entering the hovel that Lear, Kent, the Fool, and Poor Tom take shelter in from the ensuing storm, Poor Tom utters some cryptic lines which evoke the aesthetic atmosphere of a fairy tale: "Childe Rowland to the dark tower came,/His word was still 'Fie, foh and fum,/I smell the blood of a British man'" (3.4.178-180). What does it mean to "smell the blood of a British man"? This essay investigates this question by considering the web allusions and cultural history around the phrase in order to examine how smell and rhetorical references to smell can become the means of constructing a racialized body. I question how odor can function as a bodily marker that figuratively essentializes race—or can delineate between British whiteness and barbarous, racial others, where the odor of the other and the olfactory capacity of the other to seek out British blood presents a threat to the purported integrity of British whiteness.

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Shakespeare Association of America
Annual Conference 2026, Denver, CO

Seminar: White Sophistry and Epistemicide

Abstract: *Othello* as Oriental She-Tragedy: Desdemona's Whiteness on the Restoration Stage

This paper will re-contextualize *Othello* generically as a Restoration Oriental she-tragedy, examining how these genres shaped the play's role in race-making during the long eighteenth century. Unlike plays like *The Tempest, Macbeth*, and (notoriously) *King Lear*, *Othello* was performed relatively unedited throughout the period and remained one of the most performed Shakespeare plays throughout the period. The first unnamed actress's appearance as Desdemona and Ira Aldridge's debut over a century later have placed the play at the center of discourse around racialized and gendered identity in performance. Like the Restoration she-tragedy, *Othello* climaxes in a woman's murder, staged in a way that evokes sexual violation. Like the Oriental tragedy, the Venice and Cyprus stagings place the titular hero at the crossroads of East and West, dramatizing the imperial project through the characters' domestic sufferings. Reading *Othello* alongside William Davenant's *The Siege of Rhodes* and Mary Pix's *Ibrahim* among others, this paper argues that *Othello*'s generic place in the repertoire works to align the representation of Desdemona with Ottoman enslavement of white women in the harem, and in doing so writes a stage vocabulary of slavery depiction that reifies whiteness, at the expense of the Black women and men who were contemporaneously suffering through the transatlantic slave trade.

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The Forty Acres of *Henry V* and the Salic Law of Heirs' Property

"'*In terram Salicam mulieres ne succedant*'" (1.2 38). In addition to the legal questions haunting the legitimacy of Henry's possession of the English crown, this is the legal clause—"'No woman shall succeed in Salic land'" (1.2. 39)— barring his equally questionable claim to France. As many critics have variously explored, the point of the play—really the tragic point of colonial-imperial history—is that there are no legal or moral-psychological obstacles more powerful than the human capacity to find or fabricate reasons, as Canterbury's argument against Salic Law attempts, to justify the desire to steal other people's land. In a sense, by alternately representing the illegal immorality of war and its dramatic rationalization, it is as if Shakespeare is testing the power of creative expression—his own power, in particular—to affect a kind of collective, celebratory moral-ethical amnesia. And that Shakespeare, for the most part, is still globally celebrated as Shakespeare is the clearest evidence of his enduring success. However, as a critically conscious African American personally fighting to retain the little that's left of the property acquired by his ancestors in the immediate post-Civil War context, it is impossible for me to forget that Henry's divinely delivered conquest of France, as he rationalizes at the end, began with a sophistical violation of the law. In this paper, as my title suggests, I will therefore weave the story of my resistance to African American land loss and historical epistemicide through and against *Henry V*, a play modelling for England—and by extension, the White world, then and now— how to justify the unjustifiable pursuit of empire.

Bischoff UCLA

Holding breath in *Richard III*

In *Richard III*, Clarence dreams of drowning. He sees thousands of shipwrecks and countless skulls, their eyes replaced by jewels. Eerily, he finds himself incapable of dying:

> …often did I strive
> To yield the ghost; but still the envious flood
> Stopp'd in my soul, and would not let it forth
> To find the empty, vast, and wand'ring air… (1.4.36-9)

He likens death to an exhale, of letting himself move past the ephemera of mercantile loss and value. Instead, however, he is suspended in time, alive for now but caught in a brutal arithmetic of value and valuelessness. He is impossibly undead, and utterly trapped.

Richard also describes air trapped under the waves: "all the clouds that low'r'd upon our house / In the deep bosom of the ocean buried" (1.1.3-4). He goes on to describe his thoughts as "diving" to reach his own soul, as if it *is* the drowned clouds of misfortune (1.1.41). He plans to bring forth submerged, but ever extant, animosities—and replace the air beneath the waves with an innocent life.

The submerged body—lost and concealed, frequently for the sake of white supremacy and human merchandise—is a contradiction. Shakespeare's world presents a trading of suspended air, a history caught but impossible to drown away. The attempt to hide the drowned is interceded by Clarence's dreaming, and performance of the play itself. The dreaming is an undead historiography, as painful as a breath held indefinitely. This paper posits that this held breath is both the story written by white supremacist violence, but also elbows in the gaps for the breaths of different memories and dreams.

“White Sophistry and Epistemicide in Shakespeare, Then and Now” SAA Seminar
Jesus Montaño

“Remembrance is a Powerful Spell”: Magic in Andrew Siañez-De La O’s *Rough Magic, a rumination on Shakespeare’s The Tempest*

Abstract
In this paper I posit that Andrew Siañez-De La O’s *Rough Magic, a rumination on Shakespeare’s The Tempest*, by turning to brujería (ancestral folk magic), calls into question the magical elements in *The Tempest* which are often linked to colonialism and domination. This turn to brujería offers an alternative understanding of magic, of its communal practice, and of the ways in which magic is transmitted and cultivated. In contrast with *The Tempest* that enlists a form of magic found in secretive knowledge bound in books that a lone possessor can wield to gain worldly goods (in what looks like a magical allegory of colonialism), Siañez-De La O’s play positions magic as ancestral knowledge put in the service of community and family. In this sense, magic is harnessed by everyday people to achieve their hopes and dreams. Thus, in the play, a fourteen-year-old girl learns magic from her grandmother, not for her own aggrandizement, but to bring people and family together—indeed, her singular wish is to meet her father who had passed away when she was a child.

Siañez-De La O’s conception of magic in the quotidian, I contend, can more accurately be described as a cultural cosmovision with roots in ancient, ancestral Indigenous thought. To this, Elena Garro, widely considered the mother of magical realism (a title that she personally eschewed), proclaimed that in contrast with the ways in which magical realism during her lifetime had been narrowly circumscribed by publishers to denote art and literature emanating from Latin America (a point that neatly “exoticized” works featuring magic), to Garro, magical realism more exactly is “la representación del pensamiento mágico y milenario de la cosmovisión indígena / the representation of the magical and ancient thought of Indigenous cosmology.” Seen from this lens, magical realism highlights the natural convivencia/coexistence of the fantastic with the quotidian in order to show a worldview that understands that time as circular (its nonlinearity based more accurately on the merging of memory, myth, and history) and in which the material world of humans overlaps with spiritual dimensions, with specific attention to the relationship between humans and a genius (a guardian or spirit) operating within the natural world. Indeed, Garro illustrates the merging of the magical and the real in *Los recuerdos del porvenir / Recollections of Things to Come*, a novel featuring a town that narrates its own story by weaving its recollections of the past, present, and future, and in “La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas / Blame It on the Tlaxcalans,” a short story in which a married woman in the modern world is visited by her first husband who died defending Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Mexicas/Aztecs. Magic, Garro would have us understands, invites an epistemological shift—a turn towards a cosmology that contrasts dramatically with a European model.

More specifically to our purpose, a turn to la cosmovisión indígena (which links the everyday with the magical) offers ways to challenge and counter the cultural and literary production of whiteness at its epistemic and rhetorical roots. With this critical lens, my goal in this paper is to explore the worlds bursting from *Rough Magic* in which neither magic nor rhetoric function as Prospero in *The Tempest* would have us understand. In other words, I seek in this paper a new

understanding of magic and rhetoric in which magic is part and parcel of the everyday and in which rhetoric and utterances align with the plural-I of *testimonio*, the Latin American and Latinx form of narration marked by an urgency to bear witness and the agency for collective action. Prospero as magician and rhetorician is revealed for who he is and what he aims to do, I believe, when he is contrasted with Siañez-De La O's Miranda, a fourteen-year-old girl learning about magic and words. *Rough Magic*, in this way, can be considered a play detailing the education and training of a bruja, one who learns from her elders and thus will grow up to use magic and words to help those around her. Moreover, Miranda becomes the bruja who uses this form of magic to challenge and contest a Eurocentric model of magic crafted for domination.

Kyle M. Labe, University of Connecticut, “White Sophistry and Epistemicide in Shakespeare, Then and Now”

“Alas, my lord, I have but killed a fly”: Simulating Racial Violence in *Titus Andronicus*

One of the most controversial scenes of *Titus Andronicus* — and one not included in the multiple quartos preceding the First Folio — comes at the end of Act 3. Marcus, noting his nephew’s distress at “his grandsire’s heaviness” (3.2.49), swats and kills a fly, insisting that “it was a black ill-favored fly, / Like to the Empress’ Moor” (66–7). At this comment, Titus takes his knife and repeatedly stabs the insect “as if it were the Moor” (73), that is, Aaron.

Despite its offensive fantasy of intracommunal white aggression, this moment has attracted surprisingly little commentary. The sadism inflicted on the insect’s corpse elicits its own series of contextual questions, but each revolves around the “problem” of Aaron and Elizabethan racial impersonation. My contention is that the fly-scene can tell us a lot about contemporary attitudes toward mimetic blackface. Ian Smith has suggested that changing technologies for racial impersonation on the early modern stage incited “visual spectacles of blackness [that] took on new emphases and meanings that, in turn, had a direct impact on the audience’s perception of the black body.”[1] In response, I argue that Titus’s simulation of racial violence anticipates and parodies the uneasy Tudor transition from allegorical to secular racial representation. By bringing focus to this frequently neglected scene, I hope to show how Shakespeare navigates the epistemological tension between simulated blackness and the white agent who fashions it.

[1] Ian Smith, “Othello’s Black Handkerchief,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2013), 9.

Closet Conduct: White Martyrdom and Exemplarity in *The Tragedy of Mariam*

Abstract

This paper argues that, as a piece of drama positioning Mariam as an exemplar, Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam* (1613) is a particularly useful case study to address these questions. Cary produces Mariam as a figure of white martyrdom whose exemplarity depends on the racialized demand that feminine virtue be fully legible. I contend that, throughout the play, Mariam's chastity, silence, and constancy are not inherent moral qualities but regulated signs reinforced through conduct literature, and the virgin martyr tradition. Scholars such as Alexandra Bennett and Erin E. Kelly respectively consider how the text stages contemporaneous anxiety about women's interiority and outward appearance, as well as contextualize *The Tragedy of Mariam* as related to contemporaneous understandings of martyrology.[1] Building on the work of Bennett and Kelly, I argue that Cary focuses on Mariam's whiteness to demonstrate the flawed logic undergirding early modern gender expectations surrounding women's interiority needing to match their appearance. Despite Mariam's confessions that she is not in love with Herod nor particularly sad about his death, Cary dwells on Mariam's whiteness and racialized Salome's evil plan instead, critiquing martyrdom and, by extension, exemplarity itself as a racialized epistemology that demands interior transparency and external hyperwhiteness. Through the genre of a closet drama, Cary thus pioneers a form of closet conduct, which she uses as a vehicle to critique contemporaneous gender expectations traditionally circulated in conduct literature.

[1] For discussion of the tension between being and seeming in *The Tragedy of Mariam*, see Alexandra G. Bennett, "Female Performativity in 'The Tragedy of Mariam,'" *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 40, no. 2 (2000): 293–309, https://doi.org/10.2307/1556130; for Mariam's relation to early modern martyrology, see Erin E. Kelly, "Mariam and Early Modern Discourses of Martyrdom," in *The Literary Career and Legacy of Elizabeth Cary, 1613–1680*, ed. Heather Wolfe (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 35–52, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230601819_3.

Laurel Billings

“My heart suspects more than my eye can see”: Making whiteness sure in *Titus Andronicus*

As Chiron and Demetrius drag Lavinia off stage to rape her, Tamora warns them to “make her sure,” presumably so she cannot attest to the violent crimes they’ve committed in this “unfrequented plot” in the woods. In this paper, I conceptualize this admonition to as part of a rhetoric that runs through the play, which I call the rhetoric of making sure. This rhetoric, as I hope to demonstrate, positions Tamora and her brood in a distinct epistemic matrix, untethered from any grounding in moral or veridical “truth.” It thereby racializes these Goths–marking them as verbally, morally, and intellectually inferior to the presumptively white spectator, who would be loath to let his (or her) own violent humors and reflexes occlude reality in such a manner. At the same time, however, the racial othering of Tamora’s brood serves to make the presumptively white viewer “sure” (distanced, safe) from the very “blindness” that Tamora’s brood, as well as Titus, dramatizes on the stage: the inability to see the non-European Other at the center of white subjectivity, forming its ontological base. For, my reading suggests, the way Aaron “looks back” at Rome, Titus, and Tamora’s brood–seeing them better than they see themselves–is conceivable only *because* there are no characters who would have registered for English viewers as “white” in the play. The physically pale but corporeally stigmatized “lime-white” Goths are thus, I conclude, a constitutive element in the construction of the unmarked, disembodied (white) gaze–and the parallel knowledge position–that this play makes available to its audiences.

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SAA '26
Abstract

How Sex Makes Race Visible in Mary Pix's *Ibrahim, the Thirteenth Emperour of the Turks* (1696)

Mary Pix's *Ibrahim, the Thirteenth Emperour of the Turks*—her first play, and a big theatrical success—takes up issues raised earlier in the century in other Turk plays, but in such a way as to foreground the role of femininity and of female characters in advancing a new view of domestic political order. As Pix's Turkish emperor exercizes both the sexual prerogatives and the absolute political authority that his status grants him, we can see the playwright dramatizing a whole range of meanings inherent in early modern Britons' notion of just who and what Turks were. More importantly for my purposes here, we can also see how important notions of sexual identity are to her play's investment in a portrait of what we can recognize as her Turks' racial difference from their spectators in the theatre. Her proto-Augustan endorsement of individual rights in the face of state tyranny—a tyranny which she associates here with eastern decadence and cruelty—is both focused on her female characters, and, in one comic interlude, animated through a young woman's assertion of her right to kind of sexual pleasure she wants against the rejected courtship of a young eunuch. This sexual situation elevates (western and white) female independence by rejecting the conspicuously othered figure of the eunuch, who is exiled from the circle of heterosexual value in which Pix's heroines gain their value.

Laughter's Racial Logics: Able-Natalism in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*
Maya Mathur

The Merry Wives of Windsor is the only comedy by Shakespeare set in rural England. Often considered an "occasional" play to commemorate the Garter festivities of 1597, *Merry Wives* suffers in comparison to the Henriad, with which it shares several characters. The most important of these is the "fat knight," Sir John Falstaff, who abandons the Boar's Head tavern and the company of Prince Hal for a brief sojourn in Windsor. The play treats Falstaff as a predatory outsider who endangers the close-knit rural community with his plans to support himself by seducing Mistress Page and Mistress Ford, the merry wives of the title. The play chronicles the wives' plots to evade Falstaff's pursuit and punish him for his attack on their marriage and reputation. The play upholds the wives' chastity in its final scene which focuses on the public shaming and expulsion of Falstaff by the women and children of Windsor. Studies of *Merry Wives*, unsurprisingly, frame the wives in proto-feminist terms for their ability to defend their marriages against a sexual predator.

This paper complicates feminist readings of the play by exploring the racist and ableist nature of Falstaff's expulsion from Windsor. Drawing on the field of premodern critical race studies and disability studies, I posit that the wives construct a white able-bodied, heterosexual community through Falstaff's shaming and expulsion from Windsor. Specifically, I suggest that references to Falstaff as cannibalistic and mummified are used to minimize his class and race alignment with whiteness make room for his physical punishment. Relatedly, I consider how the wives' depiction of Falstaff's depiction as fat, impotent, and diseased marks him as an outsider and justifies his expulsion from the community. Although Shakespeare's Windsor is both culturally and linguistically diverse, this paper suggests that wives' schemes against Falstaff ensure that its reproductive future is limited to the slender, white, and able-bodied.

Patricia Cahill
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November 30, 2026

SAA Abstract for "White Sophistry and Epistemicide" Seminar

Convened by Nora Galland and Katherine Gillen

Predatory Knowledge: Hunting, Whiteness, and Epistemic Violence in Shakespeare's *3 Henry VI*

In this paper, I focus on the racial valences of three hunting narratives in *3 Henry VI* : Henry's capture by gamekeepers, Edward's escape while hunting, and Richard's self-fashioning as a predator. Reading these narratives through Charles Mills's theories of white ignorance, I argue that hunting structures the play's racialized ways of knowing. Henry's non-predation becomes illegible to others; Edward's "fair" body is read as political truth; and Richard's weaponization of predatory knowledge exposes the violence beneath Yorkist whiteness. Through such narratives, I contend, the play foregrounds a specifically white epistemology: a way of interpreting the world that depends on tracking, sorting, seizing, and stabilizing meaning through force. Drawing on Rebecca Mason's work on hermeneutical ignorance, I conclude by suggesting that the play asks what it might mean to refuse the hunt and imagine epistemic justice beyond such predatory logics.

Mason, Rebeccca. "Two Kinds of Unknowing." *Hypatia*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2011, pp. 294–307. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23016547.

Mills, Charles W., 'White Ignorance', *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism* (New York, 2017; online edn, Oxford Academic, 23 Mar. 2017), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190245412.003.0004