

# Reviewing Ira Aldridge: *Red Velvet* and Revisionist Narrative

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## Abstract

This essay argues that formal techniques of "revision" have been central to representing the significance of Ira Aldridge's blackness. I take the acts of repeat observation and anachronism in Lolita Chakrabarti's biopic play *Red Velvet* as cues for examining how revision makes racial meaning. Putting the play's treatment of Aldridge and Othello in conversation with a wider network of theater writing — including newspaper and memoir accounts of Aldridge's Othellos in 1833 and 1865, critical responses to *Red Velvet* in 2012 and 2017, and Shakespeare performance histories — I analyze the techniques of what I call "revisionist narratives" of black Shakespeare performance. I use the word "revisionist" not as a historical judgment but a conceptual index to how this kind of spectator narrative works: (1) as a revision, it is not just about what is seen by observers but what is seen again and seen at a different angle; (2) as a revisionist narrative about past events, it uses its retrospective position to structure temporalities of anticipation and anachronism. In the essay's coda, I explore how such revisionist narratives might be repurposed for anti-racist work.

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## Introduction

*Take One.* For its opening act, Lolita Chakrabarti's *Red Velvet* (2012) shows audiences Ira Aldridge at his end. It's 1867 in Lodz, Poland, and the first African American actor to play Shakespearean roles on the international stage is reviewing his career as he chats with an aspiring white journalist, Halina Wozniak. Halina has read up on her subject. Though she is seeing Aldridge for the first time, she has studied reports of his previous appearances to prepare for her retrospective. Throughout their conversation, she refers to the testimony of her parents, to Aldridge's reviews, to clips from newspapers, to "someone she once met who said..." (Chakrabarti 2014, 18).<sup>1</sup> As a proxy for a curious audience, this white woman offers *Red Velvet's* spectators a way of looking at Aldridge, both for the first time and through the lens of what's already been seen.

*Take Two.* In 1833, Pierre Laporte announces that Aldridge will take over for the ailing Edmund Kean. In Chakrabarti's dramatization, the two characters who know Aldridge is black — Laporte himself and one minor actor, the young Henry Forester — circle around the issue of his race. "Have you seen him?" Forester asks Laporte. Upon hearing an affirmative, Forester continues, obliquely: "So you know...That he...really is the best man for the job" (Chakrabarti 2014, 30). The audience has been taught how to read these pauses. Having already seen the actor playing Aldridge in the first scene, spectators fill in the blanks Forester leaves with the blackness they have already witnessed. When Aldridge finally enters, Forester's elliptical suspensions become general among the white cast: "(*Open mouthed silence.*)...(Silence)" (Chakrabarti 2014, 32). While Othello's entrance is prepared by the jeers and nicknames of his enemies, the onstage responses to Aldridge's appearance happen in the space between clauses, the silences of shock, and the need to look twice to grasp a full meaning.

*Take One, A Second Time.* In the final scene, Aldridge is old again, getting into the character of Lear by looking into the mirror. When Halina searches for a word to describe how she feels as a woman in a male-dominated workplace, Aldridge turns around to supply it: "visible" (Chakrabarti 2014, 84). The audience now has the option to make his blackness visible again, as they might look at Aldridge's spotlighted face (the whiteface he has applied both concealing and offsetting the actor's black skin) and, perhaps, at his back, from another angle, through the mirror.

I open with these double takes from *Red Velvet* in order to foreground the work of revision in representing Ira Aldridge's blackness. By "revision" I mean not only the creative license this particular play takes in its representation of Aldridge's career, but also a set of formal techniques it uses to narrativize and stage the significance of Aldridge's race. *Red Velvet* makes acts of repeat observation central to the plot. From its retrospective frame narrative to the "play within a play" scenes, the play asks contemporary audiences to watch Shakespeare, *Othello*, and Aldridge's black performance both through their own eyes and through the imagined, reconstructed eyes of nineteenth-century spectators.

Since the play debuted in London in 2012, critics have sometimes pointed out certain excesses in the historical juxtapositions the play constructs between "us" and "them." In her analysis of the original 2012 production, Sophie Duncan suggests that the play omits certain details (selecting only Aldridge's most critical reviews, for example, and skipping over any mention of the actor's performances in burlesque and minstrel roles) in order to align Aldridge's career with contemporary progressive ideals (Duncan 2015, 249).<sup>2</sup> Reviewing a new production of the play at the Chicago Shakespeare Theater in 2017, theater critic Chris Jones objects more strongly, as he suggests

Chakrabarti resorts to flat characterization and anachronism and expresses discontent with the "excessive, explicit" links the author forges between 1833 and the "postmodernist" present (Jones 2017).

In this essay, I want to take the excessive realignments and anachronisms of *Red Velvet* as cues for analyzing how revision makes racial meaning. Putting the play's revisions of Aldridge and *Othello* in conversation with a wider network of theater writing — including newspaper and memoir accounts of Aldridge's Othellos in 1833 and 1865, critical responses to *Red Velvet* in 2012 and 2017, and Shakespeare performance histories — I analyze the techniques of what I call "revisionist narratives" of black Shakespeare performance. I use the word "revisionist" not as a historical judgment but as a conceptual index to how this kind of spectator narrative works: (1) as a revision, it is not just about what is seen by observers but what is seen again and seen at a different angle; (2) as a revisionist narrative about past events, it uses its retrospective position to structure temporalities of anticipation and anachronism. Both the visual and print-narrative meanings contained in "review" and "revision" are thus active in my analysis of how spectators use acts of repeat viewing and rewriting to construct the meaning of blackness.

Both my analyses and my scholarly goals depend on crucial work in premodern and modern critical race studies by scholars like Margo Hendricks, Kim F. Hall, Ayanna Thompson, Amy Wong, Alicia Christoff, and Ronjaunee Chatterjee.<sup>3</sup> As the essay's coda unpacks in more detail, my primary aim is to respond to these scholars' call to develop shareable strategies — not only for working on racism but also, and much more importantly, for doing anti-racist work.

## 1. Revision

In one of *Red Velvet*'s pivotal scenes — the effective turning point in the play's presentation of Aldridge — the cast gathers to discuss their debut performance the night before and to read their (utterly damning, in Chakrabarti's version) press reviews. *Red Velvet*'s audience hears the reports before Aldridge does, as the other actors recite the accounts out loud: "A part which the fire and genius of Edmund Kean has made his exclusive property," Charles Kean reads, "to be presented in an English national theatre by one whose pretences rest upon the grounds of his face being of a natural instead of an acquired tint" (Chakrabarti 2014, 67). When Aldridge arrives, the other actors flee one by one, leaving him to read the reviews silently to himself. He stands alone on stage with the newspapers, isolated in a spotlight, as stage hands strip the stage around him of carpets, fauteuils, and tea sets: all the trappings of the polite London society to which Chakrabarti's Aldridge has tried and failed to gain admittance.

While the structure of this particular scene depends on condensing the press response into a single delivery of papers, so that audience opinion of Aldridge seems to be formed in one moment of synchronous publication and in reference to one singular predecessor, the circulation of nineteenth-century theater reviews involved longer processes of repetition and revision more similar to the double takes traced in my opening readings. As Paul Prescott notes, "British Shakespearean theatre reviewing...is insistently intertextual and constantly recycles past writing and past experiences," and "[t]he extent of theatregoers' dependence on previous experience — their own and others — is greater in a crowded and high-status performance tradition such as that of Shakespearean production" (Prescott 2003, 4-5). In the ghostly world of theatrical performance, what is being viewed for the first time is also already a revision.<sup>4</sup> This may be particularly true of nineteenth-century reviews, which circulated in a periodical culture of serial publication that encouraged the construction of layered and multi-part narratives. Though the first great serial success wouldn't come until Charles Dickens's *Pickwick Papers* (serialized from March 1836 to November 1837), early nineteenth-century theater critics had already begun covering leading productions in series format, often responding to writers for other publications and reprinting reviews of previous performances in sequential but recursive revisions.

In the press conversations leading up to and following Aldridge's Covent Garden debut, for example, serial notices of his performance echo *Red Velvet's* representation of his acting as both unforeseen and already witnessed. By the time he stepped onto his first "major stage," at least some portion of the theatergoing public had already formed impressions of what Aldridge's Othello might look like: either by witnessing Aldridge's previous performances in the country (at minor theaters in London in 1825 and during the winter of 1829-30, and at provincial theaters in England from 1825-1833) or by going to see the English comedian Charles Mathews (whose acts included impersonations of a different African American actor styling himself the "African Roscius").<sup>5</sup> Press notices of Aldridge's premier — both negative and positive — make use of these previous performances in their attempts to shape expectations for the novelty of his mainstage Othello.

Take Gilbert Abbott à Beckett, from whose reviews in *Figaro in London* repeat readers would have come to expect especially biting critiques, and who fortifies his own perspective on Aldridge through acts of repeat viewing. Á Beckett primes his audience to see Aldridge's "introduction to the boards of Covent Garden theatre" through his own previous criticism:

This wretched upstart is about to defile the stage, by a foul butchery of Shakspeare, and Othello is actually the part chosen for the sacrilege. Is it because nature has supplied the man

with a skin that renders soot and butter superfluous, is it on the strength of his blackness that he considers himself competent to enact the part of the Moor of Venice. We have before jammed this man into atoms by the relentless power of our critical battering ram, but unless this notice causes the immediate withdrawal of his name from the bills, we must again inflict on him such a chastisement as must drive him from the stage he has dishonoured. (à Beckett 1833, 56)

The narrator represents Aldridge's upcoming debut as materially dependent not only on the actor's prior appearances (proceeding only on the strength of his skin) but also on the physical force of critical narrative (the "battering" of the press breaks down the "atoms" of his body). The mixed verb tenses collapse the future (a time when Aldridge will "defile the stage") into the past (as if "he has dishonoured" the stage already), in order to suggest that it is the narrator of the passage — as much as the performance event itself — that creates the double take of Aldridge as both new and repeated. Where the audience of *Red Velvet* is called on to complete the meaning of Aldridge's performance by drawing on their own previous observations of the actor in the frame narrative, the audience of *Figaro in London* is asked to frame his introduction through previous print narratives.

In response to the article in the *Figaro in London*, a member of the Garrick Club circulated a handbill that takes up à Beckett's preview/review in structure as well as content. Though the author of the handbill bases their appeal for forbearance in part on the untried qualities of Aldridge's performance ("To condemn unheard," the handbill argues, "is contrary to the character and known liberality of Englishmen"),<sup>6</sup> the anonymous "Public's Humble Servant" also directs readers to the evidence of past appearances — to Aldridge's "able delineations of many of the principal characters of our most eminent dramatic writers," which have "been admitted in the numerous criticisms inserted in the Edinburgh, Dublin, Aberdeen, Bath, Brighton, and other provincial papers" (Reprinted in Marshall and Stock 1958, 118). Attached to the handbill is a review of Aldridge's performance as Zanga in *The Revenge* in Edinburgh as evidence of these criticisms. By nesting a previous spectator narrative within its defense of Aldridge's future performance, the handbill follows à Beckett's lead in suggesting that audiences shape their expectations for *Othello* by returning to past critical narratives.

The press appears in these pieces not as a place to read a final judgment on performances after the fact, but as an ongoing network of narrativization, so that even notices published after Aldridge's debut continue to return to past points of view. Not only do reviewers place Aldridge's *Othello* in relation to previous iterations of the role (especially by Edmund Kean, William Macready, and John Phillip Kemble), they also engage insistently with each other. After *Figaro in London* printed

a post-performance notice that rehearsed their previous criticisms of Aldridge and took credit for the production's early cancellation (*Figaro in London* 1833, 64), for example, the *National Omnibus* issued a rejoinder, "return[ing] to the subject of Mr. Aldridge's appearance at Covent Garden Theatre" and contesting *Figaro's* narrative by "repeating" their positive perception of his *Othello* (*National Omnibus* 1833, 38). Further responses to the controversy between *Figaro in London* and the Garrick Club issued from *Bell's Weekly Messenger*, the *New Court Journal*, the *Sunday Herald*, and the *Morning Post* (Lindfors 2007, 159). In these days before late-Victorian theater critic Clement Scott made first-night reviews the order of the day, no cast could hope to digest the press opinion of their performances in just one sitting. The nineteenth century's serial print market facilitated more protracted revisions of performance, with meaning shaped through rejoinders, repeat appearances, and reprinted perspectives.

The meaning of all performances is made through such repetition with a difference (what Richard Schechner calls "restored" or "twice-behaved" behavior); but the role of repeated and redirected difference is particularly pronounced in observations of black performance (Schechner 2002, 29). As Harvey Young points out, "*Black* is always an imprecise projection or designation," and the "mystery of blackness...manages to become a *fact* through repeated deployment across a range of bodies" (Young 2010, 7). Revisionist narratives not only record these repeated deployments, but also reenact them. By directing spectators to craft meaning through layered and refracted points of view, such narratives use their own techniques of redeployment and scattered projection to shape the meaning of blackness. While *Red Velvet's* acts of revision might seem more obvious — given its historical distance and self-consciously fictionalized narrative — the reviews produced in Aldridge's present are far from simple reflections of racist ideologies. To understand these narratives' power to shape Aldridge's afterimage for successive generations, it is necessary to conceptualize a serial spectatorship: reviewing as not just a record of reception but as a renarrativization of and through repeat observation.

## 2. Revisionist

When spectators watch replays, they have more power to watch out of order — to mix past action with present views, as *Red Velvet* frequently does. The play deploys anachronism for a range of purposes, from cheeky jokes, as when Ellen Tree responds to Aldridge's theory of acting with "How...avant-garde" (Chakrabarti 2014, 37), to shocking sound bites (as Duncan notes, the virulently racist review from which Charles Kean pronounces the n-word is actually not about his 1833 *Othello* but about an 1825 performance as Oroonoko in *The Revolt of Surinam* (Duncan 2015, 229-230).<sup>7</sup> While the exact setting of the play — especially its entanglement with protests

leading up to the abolition of slavery in British colonies in 1834 — seems at times to be highly significant, such anachronistic reshufflings of words and events engage the audience in reading Aldridge through less linear chronologies. Indeed, readers of the play find its time signature to be displaced as early as the title page, which lumps both of the play's settings (Poland, 1867 and London, 1833) into the spatio-temporality of the "Victorian (British and American), 19th Century," thus collapsing the romantic period into the Victorian and the historical eras of Poland and the United States into Great Britain (Chakrabarti 2014, 5).

Some theater reviewers have taken Chakrabarti to task for this loose approach to historical sequence; and yet it often seems necessary to read Aldridge's career backwards as well as forwards. As Joyce Green MacDonald demonstrates, his first British performances are significant for their departure from theatrical precedent (MacDonald 1994, 232-36). Yet the full meaning of his Covent Garden *Othello* also seems to depend crucially on what happened later. When he took the London stage to play both Shakespeare's *Othello* and the comic caricature Mungo — two roles that he played in repertory, first in 1825 and again in 1833 — Aldridge appears to have anticipated the coming British craze for minstrelsy and blackface Shakespearean burlesque,<sup>8</sup> which had started to kindle with Charles Mathews but didn't really take fire until the late 1830s-1860s, after Thomas Dartmouth Rice took his "Jim Crow" act across the Atlantic to London in 1836.<sup>9</sup> If by placing *Red Velvet* in the Victorian period rather than the romantic, Chakrabarti tips Aldridge's career forward, toward the more overtly racist performance practices to come, so too do many histories of his career. MacDonald, for example, links Aldridge's *Othello* with Maurice Dowling's *Othello* burlesque in 1834 (which premiered at Liverpool's Liver Theatre) and with later "darkey dramas" like the American *Dar's De Money* or *Desdemonum, An Ethiopian Burlesque* (MacDonald 1994, 233). Duncan and Virginia Mason Vaughan concur, describing Aldridge's performances of Mungo in particular as "point[ing] the way to ... [minstrelsy]" (Duncan 2015, 247) and a "harbinger of future taste in entertainment" (Vaughan 2005, 169).

Positioning his career on an even longer retrospective trajectory, scholars have also described Aldridge as a forerunner for later black *Othellos* like Paul Robeson (in 1930) and James Earl Jones (in 1964), whose performances helped change the course of *Othello*'s stage embodiment.<sup>10</sup> This genealogy suggests itself in part because it mirrors the structure of many Shakespeare reception histories, which approach Shakespeare performance as a "reflector" of cultural meanings (Vaughan 1994, i). Vaughan's *Othello: A Contextual History*, for example, sets out to "place the *Othello* of a particular generation and culture within its historical framework and to demonstrate why elements from the original text(s) were emphasized or repressed" (Vaughan 1994,

7). This approach, centered around the primary aspects of an "episteme's cultural attitudes," leads Vaughan to conclude that *Othello* did not undergo the "radical shift" toward emphasizing racial difference over terms of similarity until the late Victorian period, when the "[l]ines of difference between Othello and his audience" became "more rigidly defined and codified" in the aftermath of the American Civil War and with the expansion of the British empire (Vaughan 1994, 159 and 162).

Yet such a narrative has trouble accommodating Ira Aldridge, whose performances in many ways do not seem to fit with the general trajectory Vaughan sketches for *Othello*'s racial history. Aldridge appears not in chapter seven (which is centered around his most immediate contemporary, William Charles Macready), but in the introduction to chapter nine, as a preparation for a discussion of Robeson:

Paul Robeson was not, of course, the first black man to enact Othello in a white cast to a white audience. During the nineteenth century, Ira Aldridge left the United States because of its segregated theater and spent a long career acting Othello on the provincial stages of England and in Europe. But though Aldridge was acclaimed as the "African Roscius," he was barred from the United States and from the prime professional theatres of London, Drury Lane and Covent Garden. It wasn't until 1930 that a black American actor would play Othello to a London audience in a major theatre, and only in 1943 was the color barrier broken on Broadway; both of these firsts featured Paul Robeson. (Vaughan 1994, 181-82)

As later research would demonstrate, this is not entirely correct (as *Red Velvet* dramatizes, Aldridge was indeed the first black American actor to play Othello to a London audience in a major theater); but what strikes me in the assignment of "first" positions is the way it pulls the meaning of Aldridge's 1833 debut almost a century forward into Robeson's in 1930.

Incorporated as a parenthetical between Robeson's stations as "not...the first" and "both of these firsts," Aldridge appears doubly as a harbinger of Robeson and as someone whose own career was left to be completed by Robeson. The suggestion is that Aldridge's performances of Othello are more closely linked in significance to those of a later moment (to the next black actor who would repeat his racial revision) than those of his own. While Robeson's position in the historical trajectory allows his performance to function as a plot twist — the "certain" turning point after which "[s]cholars and audiences have been aware...of *Othello* as a text about constructions of racial identity" — the summary of Aldridge's career is so isolated from the two chapters covering the nineteenth century that he appears himself to be a kind of anachronism: a racial act so anticipatory that its full meaning only exists at a later point in time (Vaughan 1994, 8-9). If, as Vaughan writes



in the introduction, *Othello* "now seems strangely prescient" in its anticipation of later connections, so too does Aldridge's impersonation of the title role seem to point proleptically toward the now.

This tendency to see Aldridge as a sign of black performances to come might seem at first to be a result of the historian's access to hindsight, but similar retrospective temporalities can also be found in nineteenth-century representations of Aldridge's *Othello*. One of the most cited passages describing the actor's performance, for example, appears in a text that is a recollection in two senses of the word: both a remembrance, recalled some time after the event in question, and a reprinting, re-collected with other pieces by the same author. *Dramatic Opinions* (1890), written by the white actress Dame Madge Kendal, gathers articles that had previously appeared in *Murray's Magazine*. The passage that has been cited and recited in relation to Aldridge's *Othello* appears in the first of these pieces:

Mr. Ira Aldridge was a man who, being black, always picked out the fairest woman he could to play Desdemona with him, not because she was capable of acting the part, but because she had a fair head. One of the greatest bits of "business" that he used to do was where in one of the scenes he had to say, "Your hand, Desdemona." He made a very great point of opening his hand and making you place yours in it; and the audience used to see the contrast. He always made a point of it, and got a round of applause, — how, I do not know. It always struck me that he had got some species of — well, I will not say "genius," because I dislike that word, as used nowadays, but gleams of great intelligence. Although a genuine black, he was quite *preux chevalier* in his manners to women. The fairer you were, the more obsequious he was to you. In the last act he used to take Desdemona out of bed by her hair and drag her round the stage before he smothered her. You had to wear sandals and toed stockings to produce the effect of being undressed. I remember very distinctly this dragging Desdemona about by the hair was considered so brutal that it was loudly hissed. (Kendal 1890, 28-30)

This passage has been quoted both as a specific record of Aldridge's 1865 version of *Othello* and as a description of his general approach to the role:<sup>11</sup> a temporal synecdoche that the chronological indistinctness of Kendal's narrator would seem to encourage. Kendal describes Aldridge's performance as both strikingly distinct in its rupture with tradition and continuous and reliable, "always" performing the same actions and eliciting the same responses. Especially when situated in the overall vagueness of the chapter's temporal progress (Kendal begins by refusing to give her date of birth and punctuates the autobiographical portion of the chapter with nonspecific markers like "until I was about fifteen"; "[a]t this time"; and "[d]uring the time that I was there"), the

passage constructs Aldridge's race as a matter of both visual contrasts — offsetting and establishing Kendal's own whiteness — and also timeless recurrence — of "being black, always" by repeating the same differences in performance (Kendal 1890, 27-28).

If the content of this narrative represents Aldridge's Othello as belonging both to a specific time of performance and to a longer continuum of action, its print history makes these dynamics of retrospection and anticipation even more pronounced. For Victorian readers, the first encounter with Kendal's narratives may have come in the pages of *Murray's Magazine: A Home and Colonial Periodical for the General Reader*. This periodical, like many of its time, printed a variety of genres, including literary criticism, biography, and serial fiction — the last of which would have especially encouraged readers to make thorough connections across issues. Kendal and her publisher certainly seem to have imagined such a return audience, because in 1880 *Murray's Magazine* printed a letter to the editor from Kendal announcing a delay in the publication of *Dramatic Opinions*. The reason given for the volume's belatedness is the anticipation of its coming. Because of the "interest which seems to have been excited" by the book, Kendal begs to "postpone for a while" its publication, in order to ensure that the final product "should be thoroughly matured" (Kendal 1889, 138). The preface to *Dramatic Opinions*, published by the same John Murray, repeats this connection between "looking forward" with the "interest which the articles aroused" and looking backward in the "reproduction" and rereading of those articles (Kendal 1890, viii). Such communications suggest that while contemporary theater histories sometimes take Kendal's narrative of Aldridge's Othello as a discrete commentary, its Victorian reprintings would have primed a nineteenth-century audience to see it as part of a series. For these original readers, the narrative construction of Aldridge's blackness happens over time and through pauses in time. Not only in the retrospective position from which Kendal's narrator recalls earlier performances, but also in the serial anticipations, delays, and reproductions of periodical publication, the time signature this revisionist narrative sets for Aldridge's performance is decidedly less than linear: "during the time that I was there"; "looking forward"; "postponing for a while."

Tracing such non-linear temporalities across this broad historical range of narratives, I see evidence that *Red Velvet's* engagement with anachronism and anticipation as mechanisms for reading race is far from an isolated artistic choice. In contemporary spectator narratives, later theater histories, and biopic plays, Aldridge's audiences construct the meaning of his performance by situating him ahead of his time (reading in his proleptic appearance the meaning of what and who will come after) and outside of time (looking back on discrete events and transforming them into apparently timeless processes of repetition). On some level, these retrospective plots are

part of all projects of performance history;<sup>12</sup> yet analyzing the meaning of racial performances in Shakespeare may generate odd temporalities of narration in particularly charged ways. Whether in the unstable travel across historical borders that Ayanna Thompson describes as Shakespeare's racial "passing" (Thompson 2011) or in the "queer temporality" of racialization that Brigitte Fielder discovers in the horizontal and "backward genealogies" of race in performances of *Othello* (Fielder 2017), the processes of constructing meaning for black performance depend to a striking degree on chronological rewriting and rearrangement.

### Coda: Anti-Racist Revisions

I look for revisionist narrative by looking back to the nineteenth century: not only to put contemporary narratives about Aldridge in conversation with those produced by his early London audiences, but also because many conversations about race circle back to that period as a site for thinking about what does and does not count as racism. In struggles over the periodization of race, the nineteenth century often comes to stand for the historical location of a comprehensible, codified racism that makes both the early modern period and our own appear more flexible by contrast. In a special issue of *Shakespeare Quarterly*, for example, Kyle Grady points out that attributing a clearly racist perspective to particular historical moments can be a way of diffusing the violence of racial ideologies in other periods, which get cast as "pre-" or "post-racial." Shakespeare critics, he notes, "often contrast the play's treatment of Othello with subsequent racial ideologies," with "later ideologies of race and ethnicity...posed as more comprehensible than early modern notions of difference" (Grady 2016, 71). The sharpness of scientific racism is used to project clarity in one direction and scatter earlier and later ideologies into a less defined spectrum. The invocation of more solid forms of racial ideology that exist elsewhere and elsewhen can lead to what Ian Smith calls a "fantasy of historical accuracy," which is used to "banish race talk" in Shakespeare studies "as a dangerous anachronism" (Smith 2016, 119).

At some point in the nineteenth century, then, racism seems to have existed in a harder and purer form than has been seen before or since; and yet in popular discourse, even this historical certainty is often diffused through the language of point of view and anachronism. Recent threads on Twitter (that new, unruly archive of revisionist narratives) reveal how "revisionist" can be used to derail anti-racist critique. Either racist viewpoints are made so specific to their own time period as to make any modern reproach anachronistic — "People need to be viewed in the context of their own time," as a Twitter commentator admonished journalism professor Jelani Cobb (@terencereilly82 2018) — or else racism is made so timeless as to make it impossible to call any particular moment in time racist — "These atrocious ideas far predate the Enlightenment," as a wave of users claimed in an

attempt to debunk editor Jamelle Bouie's analysis of the development of slavery (@m\_greenberg1 2018). In his rebuttal to Bouie, *Federalist* writer Ben Domenech repeats the claims that racist "view[s] ha[ve] always been with us" and "racist segregations, separations, and hierarchies were ever-present," not locatable in the specific moment of the Enlightenment (Domenech 2018). Across these narratives, both "racism didn't exist yet" and "racism existed before then" are used to discredit analyses of white supremacy and delimit the expansion of critical race studies.

If "not then," "not yet," and "always" can turn into tools to forestall anti-racist analysis by fixing racism in a different time or outside of time, can anti-racist critics retool revision for new ends? In an attempt to do just that, I want to revise my discussions of *Red Velvet*'s "contemporary audience": first, by disaggregating the general category of "audience"; and second, by dilating the many temporalities collected under "contemporary."

*Take One:* "audience." For among the many audiences who have filtered through playhouses to watch *Red Velvet*, I am one spectator with a particular point of view: a white woman watching a performance of the play in Chicago in 2017. In observing my own position in the theater and as a critic writing about Ira Aldridge, I note my proximity to those unreliable white narrators that Ian Smith argues have often told Othello's story, both within the play and within a predominantly white academy. As Smith points out, Othello's search for a trustworthy spectator-narrator — for a witness who will "Speak of me as I am" (5.2.402) — is a call to reflection for contemporary scholars:

"Speaking of" Othello, that is, speaking and writing about race within the discipline, requires unpacking one's white positioning to reach toward new forms of racial knowledge. Speaking of Othello is an invitation to see and engage from a conscious, racialized perspective. (Smith 2016, 122)

Identifying the limits of one's critical position means trading aspirations to objective, depersonalized knowledge (the totalizing gaze and hypermobility that critics of nineteenth century literature have called "omniscient" narration and that Smith identifies as a specifically "white invisibility — that is, its hegemonic ubiquity") for ethical consciousness of partiality (Smith 2016, 107). Reflecting on the Race Before Race Symposium at Arizona State University in 2019, Ambereen Dadabhoy articulated this ethical call as a need to "confront the ubiquitous and unbearable whiteness of our fields, not simply in the way that the objects we study are evacuated of racial character and racialized bodies erased from the historical and material record but also in the composition of the practitioners in our fields" (Dadabhoy 2019).

I am interested in revisionist narratives as a way of understanding the strategies of white spectatorship, but more importantly as a method for reverse-engineering the protracted, contested,

and partial processes of racialization that whiteness might otherwise collapse into one view of reception. Insofar as they direct audiences to encounter racial performance as both new and already seen, many revisionist narratives about Aldridge claim for white spectators the role of looking first and last — of centering what Atsede Makonnen calls "the white moment of seeing" (Makonnen 2019, 23). But those same mechanisms of repetition and reenactment might be used to refract attention in the other direction, scattering "hegemonic ubiquity" into a series of partial points of view, a multifocal narrative.<sup>13</sup>

*Take Two:* "contemporary." For *Red Velvet*, like *Othello*, has more than one contemporary audience; and if it's tempting to read Ira Aldridge's 1833 *Othello* in light of the coming movement toward minstrelsy and blackface burlesque, how enticing, too, is it to read in Adrian Lester's 2012 performance of Aldridge the sign of things to come? In her 2015 essay, Duncan engages with one piece of foreknowledge that *Red Velvet's* initial audiences would have had. At the time that Lester took the stage as Aldridge/*Othello*, Duncan points out, he had already been announced as the star of a 2013 National Theatre production of *Othello*, to be directed by Nicholas Hytner. Audiences of *Red Velvet* in 2012 could look forward to his *Othello* and, eventually, look back on his Aldridge:

Hytner directed Lester in an ultra-modern production set in a Middle Eastern warzone. Lester insisted that their *Othello* was "not just about [Othello's] colour." This twenty-first century setting rendered Iago's racism shockingly archaic. The ghosting of an environment in which, according to Hytner, "very few people are vocally racist" might also have refocused audience perceptions of *Red Velvet's* supporting cast. (Duncan 2015, 241-42)

The refocalizations that might take place when recalling 2012 from the perspective of 2013 open up an even more dizzying double vision available from my perspective in 2019: a time when Hytner's colorblind conception and confidence that "very few people are vocally racist" appears far more "archaic" and anachronistic than Iago's anti-blackness. How different do *Othello* and *Red Velvet* appear in 2017 than they did in 2012? Setting these audiences side by side presents me with two lines of vision and two perceptions of anachronism, but with their objects reversed, flipped at a point of historical refraction.

What this particular revision reveals is not only that the "post-racial" has turned out to be not terribly "post-" after all, but also that the frames and plots that spectators use to narrate performances in the present are often most visible when reexamined from a different perspective and an alternative temporality. Revising my view in light of other spectators' perspectives does not necessarily sharpen my observation. Indeed, the effect of looking through the frames produced in 2012, 1865, and 1833 is often more productive of misalignments and blurred visual fields than of

historical clarity. Yet such instances of double vision, as this essay has suggested, are themselves key mechanisms in the creation of racial meanings. Far from being an imposition of contemporary critical practice, the move to view racial performance both backwards and forwards was a central tactic of Aldridge's earliest spectators. Studying revisionist narratives, then, might offer ways of revising scholarly narratives of racial performance — of adding more perspectives and writing toward critical vanishing points.

### Notes

1. For more on Aldridge's reception in Poland, see Bernth Lindfors (2013) and Krystyna Kujawinska Courtney (2019).
2. Duncan also served as historical advisor for this production, and I am indebted to her analysis and explanations of the 2012 performances.
3. Though this list is by no means exhaustive, I cite these scholars for both their foundational work in the fields and their efforts to innovate new scholarly forms and collectives. See, for example, Thompson's crucial work organizing the RaceB4Race symposiums, as well as Hendricks' (2019) keynote at the second symposium on race and periodization; Hall's (2019) SAA plenary talk; and the special issue of *Victorian Studies* edited by Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong (forthcoming in 2020).
4. Both Prescott's study and my own work are informed by Marvin Carlson's (2003) work on "ghosting" in performance: the phenomenon whereby each new performance is haunted by previous enactments (of the actor in different roles, or of different actors in the same role, for example).
5. Bernth Lindfors argues that some of Aldridge's spectators may have confused him with the actor that Mathews lampooned; and it's likely that Mathews's acts primed audiences to take black performance as a laughable practice (Lindfors 2007). Aldridge himself turned the slippage into a professional advantage, developing a revisionist parody of Mathews's performance that he acted in the interlude between plays (Lindfors 2013). I am grateful to my reviewer for drawing this to my attention. For more discussions about Mathews's role in preparing an audience for blackface minstrelsy in Great Britain, see Joyce Green MacDonald (1994), Edward Ziter (2007), and Tracy C. Davis (2011).
6. That the Public Servant frames Aldridge's *Othello* as "unheard" is surely no accident, as facility with Shakespeare's English was a key technique for national gatekeeping in nineteenth-century Britain. Amateur critic Sir Theodore Martin, for example, complains that "It is indeed time to make a protest, against the utterance of English poetry being entrusted to strangers, when not

only is every species of barbarism in pronunciation tolerated, but the very power of delivering a blank verse line is all but extinct. Who has not experienced the delight of merely listening to the French tongue as it is spoken at the *Comedie Française*? There a pure standard is still preserved, as in past days the standard utterance of our own speech was preserved at Drury Lane and Covent Garden. Now all is chaos, and the chances are that, whatever the play, we shall hear, before the second act, every variety of accent and utterance, from the broken English of the foreigner, the nasal drawl and harsh vowel sounds of the American, down to the kitchen English of that large class of actresses who have been promoted of late years...from the ballet into speaking parts" (Martin 1874, 151). Working in tandem with techniques of "revision," narratives about what can or should be *heard* in Shakespeare worked to protect Victorian boundaries of race, nation, and class: all of which intersected in narratives about Aldridge's Othello.

7. The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates the first use of this particular meaning of "avant-garde" (that is, to refer to first-wave developments in an artistic movement) to 1910.
8. Mungo is a comic servant, typically played by a white actor in blackface, who appears in a number of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century plays, including Charles Dibdin's *The Padlock* (1768).
9. For analyses of the increasing inflexibility of the racist ideologies represented in blackface performance as mid-century conflicts over slavery intensified, see Hazel Waters (2009) and Robert Nowatzki (2010). These authors build on foundational studies of blackface minstrelsy in the United States context, especially by Eric Lott (1993).
10. This change was slow in coming, as white actors appeared in blackface versions of the role as recently as Anthony Hopkins's BBC Television Performance in 1981.
11. While MacDonald, for example, ties the perspective to Kendal's professional and social position as a white actress and to her historical location as "Aldridge's last English Desdemona in 1865" (MacDonald 1994, 244), John Glavin describes her more generally as having "appeared in the Ira Aldridge Othello" (Glavin 2012, 831).
12. Theorists like Joseph Roach, Diana Taylor, and Rebecca Schneider have analyzed performance's relation to history through processes of surrogation (Roach 1996), repertoire (Taylor 2003), and reenactment (Schneider 2011).
13. I am grateful to Makonnen and Su Fang Ng, whose conversations at the RaceB4Race symposium on Race and Periodization (2019) helped me develop this point.

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