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Her name, that was as fresh
As Dian’s visage, is now begrimed and black
As mine own face. – William Shakespeare, Othello

Nineteenth-century Americans were fascinated with Othello and with producing racialized performances of blackness; Othello was most often performed by white actors in some form of blackface.\(^2\) Since blackface makeup was transferrable, these performances also illustrated racist anxieties about interracial coupling. Audience accounts convey that by the end of the play Othello’s “blacking” had inevitably rubbed off onto the “white” Desdemona. William Winter, for example, recounts Junius Brutus Booth’s Othello: “on one occasion, having no black stockings, he blackened his legs as well as his face and hands, and thereby, in the course of the performance, soiled the white dress of the fair Desdemona.”\(^3\) Another review notes blacking makeup’s “many disadvantages: particularly in coming off inconveniently and being transferable from hand to hand; oftentimes they were seen to touch nothing they did not soil; let it be Desdemona’s dress or even her cheek.”\(^4\) English actor Ellen Terry complains that Henry Irving, playing Othello to Terry’s Desdemona in 1881, left her “as black as he.”\(^5\)

The fact that Desdemona could become—quite literally—“begrimed and black” is more than a curiosity of this medium of performance. Begrimed and blackface Desdemonas are testaments to complex theorizations of race and the non-normative genealogies by which race was imagined to be transferred. Nineteenth-century minstrel performances theorized race, presenting ideas about what race was and how it worked. These ideas were influenced by historical racial discourses to which minstrelsy
also contributed. Performances of *Othello* illustrate a theory of racial formation, according to which blackness might be transferred from black men to white women, resulting in white women’s re-racialization. Simply put, the “begrimed” Desdemona literalizes white racist anxieties about interracial sex. As Abigail Adams recalls in 1785, “my whole soul shuderd [sic] when ever I saw the sooty More [sic] touch fair Desdemona.” What about this “sooty” touch was perceived to threaten white womanhood? This image of Desdemona “begrimed” illustrates how nineteenth-century American beliefs about interracial sex came to bear on understandings of white womanhood. Desdemona’s whiteness is not permanent in this understanding; in these plays we see how she might become black herself as a result of interracial sexuality.

While Shakespeare scholars have discussed *Othello*’s significance for early modern racial formation and have recounted the play’s American performance history, a discussion of nineteenth-century American adaptations of *Othello* requires their contextualization within American racial formation and the attendant stakes of race and racism. As Ayanna Thompson suggests, just as Shakespeare studies can benefit from thinking about race, race studies can benefit from thinking about Shakespeare. We can learn much about how race was constructed in nineteenth-century America by reading racial representation in the period’s most racially invested Shakespearean play. Celia Daileader describes the cultural work of *Othello* in her notion of “Othellophilia:” “the critical and cultural fixation on Shakespeare’s tragedy of interracial marriage to the exclusion of broader definitions, and more positive visions, of inter-racial eroticism.” This phenomenon illustrates the iconic resonance of Shakespeare’s couple, making *Othello* a fertile site for racial discourse. Although Angela C. Pao argues that “complex investigations into the politics of identity” were not possible until late twentieth-century performances and analyses of *Othello*, Robert Toll, Francesca T. Royster, and others have acknowledged nineteenth-century Shakespearean minstrel adaptations as distinctly American tools for theorizing race. Sharing this recognition of nineteenth-century racial theorizations as well as Daileader’s assessment that both white and black women are central to these narratives, I show how depictions of begrimed and blackface Desdemona theorize the connections between race, gender, and sexuality by challenging popular notions of white womanhood and commenting on the constructions of black womanhood to which Blackface Desdemona alludes.

This essay explains how blackface performance came to bear upon
representations not of Othello, but of Desdemona. Here, we see a theory of race that not only registers its apparent materiality and gendered signification, but also literalizes anxieties about race’s movement through the spectacle of racial transfer. These representations of racial transfer ultimately suggest the queer temporalities of racialization inherent in nineteenth-century constructions of white womanhood. Desdemona offers a temporality in which race does not follow normative genealogies of inheritance but works backward from sexual(ized) contact with Othello. First, I will discuss how tropes of white womanhood depended upon assumptions about the transfer of race via heterosexual sex in the image of Desdemona “begrimed.” Next, I examine Desdemona’s whiteness via nineteenth-century American readings of her potential re-racialization, showing how this theory of Desdemona begrimed works against normative ideologies of genealogically inherited race. Moving to a discussion of minstrel adaptations in which Desdemona’s whiteness is refigured in blackface performance, I read a figure I call “Blackface Desdemona” as further complicating this linearity of gendered racialization. Blackface Desdemona simultaneously re-imagines this iconic white woman as racially/sexually “pure” while alluding to actual black women, whose oppression is inherently linked to popular images of Desdemona. Ultimately, examining Blackface Desdemona reveals the implications of Desdemona’s racialization for rethinking American racial theories beyond the normative genealogies of race that continue to dominate racial discourse.

“Tapping your White Ewe”: White Women and Sexual Kinship

In its theorization of intersectional racialization, Othello becomes what might be called a very “American” play. It makes sense that Americans would reinterpret Othello as a way of processing our own national-racial drama. In Playing in the Dark, Toni Morrison writes of “the ways in which a nonwhite Africanlike (or Africanist) presence or persona was constructed in the United States, and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served.” 10 One such use of the “African” becomes visible in how Othello becomes an American ur-text for interracial sexuality and for theorizing race more broadly. Othello and Desdemona are icons, masking other combinations of interracial sexuality and reifying oppositional race/gender difference in the dualism of white women and black men. 11 This construction of interracial heterosexuality has been reiterated in American cultural representations of interracial relations and has influenced “anti-
miscegenation” law, along with state-sanctioned and extralegal racial violence. Discussions of blackface performance have focused largely on the failed mimesis of blackface caricatures and (as scholars including Eric Lott have noted) significations of race, class, masculinity, and desire. Relatively, most prominent nineteenth-century discussions of white womanhood insisted upon white women’s biological, unchangeable whiteness, and need for racialized protection. In the last act of Shakespeare’s play, Othello laments Desdemona’s “name that was as fresh / As Dien’s visage, is now begrimed and black / As mine own face.” This comparison signified both sexually and racially for audiences. While Lois Potter argues, “So long as Othello was played by a white actor, sexual propriety was likely to be more important than the possibility of racial scandal,” this was not the case in nineteenth-century America. Rather, notions of sexual propriety were informed by—and inextricable from—racial scandal for a text most often read as an “anti-miscegenation” play. In 1836, John Quincy Adams writes that “the great moral lesson of the tragedy of Othello, [sic] is that black and white blood cannot be intermingled in marriage without a gross outrage upon the law of Nature; and that, in such violations, Nature will vindicate her laws.” For racist readers and audiences, Desdemona is not “begrimed” by any false charge of adultery but by her marriage to Othello—a marriage that would have been prohibited by many states in which Othello was performed throughout the nineteenth- and into the mid-twentieth-century. Although Virginia Mason Vaughan indicates that “Shakespeare did not necessarily accept his society’s fears about miscegenation,” most nineteenth-century white Americans probably did hold such fears, as is evident in their interpretations of the play. I share James Shapiro’s view that “Spectators throughout antebellum America, a nation hurtling toward civil war over the question of race, certainly saw Othello through a different lens than British audiences at the time.” American discussions of Othello have been less invested in early modern perceptions of race than in American racial construction. In some nineteenth-century American productions, lines with connotations of interracial sex were excised, such as “Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe,” “you’ll have your daughter cover’d with a Barbary horse;” and “Your daughter and the Moor are now . . . making the beast with two backs.” In this manner, Othello’s discourses of interracial sexuality were significantly revised. Sexual relations between black men and white women were
not unthinkable in nineteenth-century America. On the contrary, this possibility was reiterated to the point of obsession in the national psyche. Documents like David Croly’s 1864 hoax pamphlet, “Miscegenation: the theory of the blending of the races, applied to the American white man and Negro,” demonstrate that racial mixture was widely viewed as a threat.

Figure 1 Edward Williams Clay, “The Fruits of Amalgamation,” lithograph, b&w (25 x 36 cm.), New York: John Childs, c. 1839. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Figure 1: detail
Othello and Desdemona appear as icons in a framed portrait that literally hangs in the background of Edward William Clay’s 1839 “The Fruits of Amalgamation.” [See figure 1] Because racial hierarchies depend upon demarcating racial difference, sexual relations that might produce mixed-race people threaten white supremacist structures. Nineteenth-century American productions of Othello emphatically and deliberately presented demonized images of black men, figuring them as threats not only to white women but also to imagined white “purity” and, therefore, to American racial hegemony.

The stakes of this threat become remarkably clear in Josiah Nott’s warning of the “probable extermination of the two races if the Whites and Blacks are allowed to intermarry.”[20] Women were particularly implicated here, as the burden of reproducing the white nation lay in the impetus to bear white children. In “The Modern Othello,” an 1863 newspaper cartoon, Othello is played by “the Everlastin’ Darkey” and Desdemona by “Columbia.” [See figure 2] As this illustration suggests, discourses of

![Figure 2: “The Modern Othello,” political cartoon, April 1863. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.](image-url)
“miscegenation” became inextricable from suggestions of a racial/national threat. Given the poignancy of images like these, it is unsurprising that most discussions of race in Othello have (quite rightly) focused on racial representation and, especially, Othello’s blackface performance history.21 Discussions of Desdemona’s relationship to blackface have been decidedly less prominent. “Blackface Desdemona” is an aberration and, therefore, bears examination beyond usual readings of Othello.

Because women sometimes bear children who are not racialized like themselves, theories of race and heterosexuality joined interracial couples in kinship not only by their coupling but also through actual or potential progeny. I call this relation “sexual kinship,” in part because of its potential to create interracial biological family regardless of legal marital status. In this encounter, notions of fixed, biological race shift to the background in favor of a construction of white womanhood that is not dependent upon linear temporalities of genealogical parentage but on what might be called “horizontal” or “backward” temporalities of racialized kinship through sexuality and child-bearing. This nonlinear genealogy might best be understood as creating a “queer temporality” of racialization, which does not adhere to what Elizabeth Freeman calls chrononormativity, “the interlocking temporal schemes necessary for genealogies of descent.”22 Despite the heterosexual framework of the Othello-Desdemona pairing, these characters’ racialization does not follow chrononormative genealogies. Race is imagined as not only transferring from past to future descendants but also horizontally through sexual encounters between partners or even in backward genealogies from child to mother. Desdemona’s racialization is thereby divorced from her parentage and linked instead to other kinship relations that racialize her: her sexual kinship with Othello and the possibility of bearing mixed-race, black children.

This imagined racial transfer must be understood not only in metaphorical but also in literal terms, as the transfer of semen, the imagined origin of biological kinship and race. The literal transfer of race—from black men (who “have” race) to white women (who “receive” and “reproduce” it)—thereby underlies white anxieties about interracial sex. This genealogy of race works both vertically and horizontally, as race is transferred not only from parents to children but from black men to their white partners. A 1799 study by Benjamin Rush evidences anxieties regarding the sexual transfer of race. In one case, he describes “a white woman in North Carolina [who] not only acquired a dark color, but several
of the features of a negro, by marrying and living with a black husband. A similar instance of a change in the color and features of a woman in Bucks county in Pennsylvania has been observed and from a similar cause. In both of these cases, the women bore children by their black husbands.” Rush’s supposition about how the white wife of a black husband might acquire black skin herself demands that we take seriously beliefs about race that today seem archaic. I do not mean to validate Rush’s theories of scientific racism but offer this as an illustration of popular beliefs about not only race’s supposed biology but also its materiality, showing that white anxieties about the possible “horizontal” transfer of race were taken seriously.

Rush’s argument construes blackness as contagion—and sexually transmitted contagion at that. Blackness becomes something contained by these white women and their offspring. Through the acts of conceiving and carrying mixed-race, black children, white women literally embody blackness, containing the racial Other within their own bodies. According to this theory, white women capable of “receiving” race in this way also become racially malleable themselves. That is, a white woman might become black as her proximity to and inextricability from her black child (or potential children) renders her own whiteness precarious. Blackface minstrelsy’s location of race upon the skin simultaneously suggests and evades its location elsewhere—particularly, in the womb, where it might be invisible. Blackface ensures the legibility of race on the bodies performing it. In the context of this understanding of racial transfer, Othello and Desdemona’s final scene becomes an easily adopted metaphor for racial anxieties, making the “dangers” of racial mixture similarly visible. I turn next from the stakes of interracial sexual kinship to the significance of Desdemona’s racial marking.

“Begrimed and Black as Mine Own Face”:
Desdemona’s Racial Marking

Productions of Othello figured race as material (locatable as marking upon the body) and as transferrable (transmittable from one person to another). Blackface productions presented race as both essential and provisional, relocating the marker of racialization from somewhere within the body (as in notions of racialized “blood”) to upon it. These productions rendered race visible, while also producing racialization as a de-essentialized practice of performance. Because blackness signifies
race in specific ways, the question of “how black” Othello ought to
be became a contentious debate, sparking arguments about whether
he should be represented as “black,” “white,” or “tawny.” In her 1869
*Studies in Shakespeare*, Mary Preston notoriously asserts that “Othello
was a white man!” Conversely, John Quincy Adams argues that Othello’s
blackness is essential to Shakespeare’s tragic plot. The question of
whether interracial romance was central to *Othello* became key to these
arguments. The de-sexualization of the play’s language and the whitening
of Othello indicate the tension between American audiences’ fascination
with coupling sexual and racial themes and their white racist anxieties
about interracial marriage. The extent to which Desdemona was marked
by her interracial encounter mattered. James Dorman, discussing the
history of Othello appearing in blackface, notes that “by the end of the
ante bellum [sic] period, Othello had to be played as near-white, or not at
all” in the American South. The spectacle of race rendered in Othello’s
representation as “less black” and in the layering of racialization in
performances by white actors in blackface served to buffer implications of
actual “miscegenation.”

Racist readings of whiteness-as-sexual-purity imply black women
as impure, over-sexualized, and sexually available—therefore, subject
to a history of systematic sexual violation. Race becomes a function of
gender and sexuality, similar to Elise Lemire’s framing of racialization as
an alignment with racially specific sexual “taste” or “preference.” Along
these lines, Mary Preston calls Othello’s blackness “a stage decoration
which my taste discards.” Preston’s “taste” cannot imagine interracial
romance in what she calls a “simple narrative” of “true love.” Othello’s
whitening on American stages functioned to preserve Desdemona’s whiteness, as did certain characters’ readings of Desdemona’s sexual/racial vic-
timization. As Iago contends, “Even now, now, very now, an old black ram
/ Is tupping your white ewe,” the urgency of his repetition places Othello,
the “old black ram,” as the active “tupper,” hiding Desdemona’s agency
in the sentence’s predicate. Likewise, Brabantio accuses Othello of having
“enchanted” Desdemona with “foul charms.” In imagining Desdemona’s
supposed passivity or enchantment, Othello emerges as a sexual/racial threat to an innocent victim, contributing to the horror of racist audiences.

This threat-victim dualism is not the only popular reading of *Othello*,
even in the nineteenth century. Some writers also explained Desdemona’s
sexuality as immorality, theorizing her death as punishment rather than
tragedy. In his assessment of interracial marriage as a “gross outrage upon
the law of Nature,” John Quincy Adams does not regard Desdemona
as a passive victim of interracial violence. Attending to the moments when a feminist reading might view Desdemona as most empowered, Adams notes her “elopement from her father’s house” and “clandestine marriage,” claiming that she “made the first advances” by giving undue attention to Othello’s “braggart story.” Desdemona’s sexuality, he holds, is “deficient in delicacy.” Adams’s fiercest critique of Desdemona focuses on her marriage. He acknowledges Desdemona’s passion, but marks it as “unnatural, solely and exclusively because of [Othello’s] color” and argues that, while not false to her husband, “she has been false to the purity and delicacy of her sex and condition when she married him.” Desdemona’s transgression is not her elopement; she cannot be compared to Juliet or Miranda, who Adams argues are driven by “pure love.” Rather, Desdemona’s “unnatural passion; it cannot be named with delicacy” constitutes her character. As Tilden Edelstein notes regarding Adams’s reading, “Only by seeing Desdemona as wanton and the play as a lesson against racial intermarriage could Adams accept the credibility of even a bleached Othello and a Desdemona who betrays her race and class.”

Mirror editor and writer, George Pope Morris attaches a similar assumption about sexual-racial preference to women he refers to as “New York Desdemonas,” white women theatergoers who, he worries, may become enamored of other blackface characters, Jim Crow and Gumbo Cuff. These readings of Desdemona locate the play’s stakes in the relationship between Desdemona’s racialization and her sexual kinship. That is, Desdemona’s apparent racial difference from Othello should preclude her sexual passion and legal marriage. These arguments of interracial sexuality as immoral also risk re-racializing white women who cannot be understood within the bounds of racial/sexual “purity.” Effectively, Desdemona is not sufficiently racist to represent white womanhood.

As these discussions of Desdemona have it, the effects of interracial sexuality come most emphatically to bear on white women. T.D. Rice’s 1844 minstrel adaptation, Otello, A Burlesque Opera, makes this point. Rice’s Otello is distinguished from the other characters through his minstrel dialect, other characters’ references to his “black” appearance, and their use of the epithet “nigger.” Otello’s difference from Desdemona is also emphasized, as Rice presents interracial marriage as the play’s central problem. The chorus predicts in the second scene that “if a black shall wed a white, / And afterwards go free, / In a very pretty pickle then / Our daughters soon will be.” This “pickle” stems from Desdemona’s original
wish “That heaven had made her such a man,” suggesting simultaneously that Desdemona both desired that such a man as Othello was made for her and that she was such a man herself. Rice reframes this wish in racialized terms, as Desdemona wishes that “Heaben hab made / Her sich a nigger”—an account that might also be understood as Desdemona’s wish for her own re-racialization. This sentiment quickly shifts, as Otello continues, “My story being done, / She only wished I had a son.” Thus Rice directly addresses Desdemona’s sexual desire and alludes to her potential embodiment of blackness. Answering the commonly debated question whether the couple’s marriage is ever consummated, Rice gives Otello and Desdemona a child.

Here Rice places clear evidence of interracial sex onstage. Oddly, this child has no lines and seems to serve no other purpose in the plot than as proof of sex. Otello and Desdemona’s child appears in the 1853 stage directions for Rice’s play simply as “child” accompanying Desdemona and is listed as “Young Otello” in an 1852 playbill. In an 1846 playbill, he appears even more interestingly as “Master Lorenzo Otello (eldest son of Otello and that there may be no partiality, nature has colored him half and half).” The child’s racial mixture—literally drawing the line of racial demarcation down the center of his body—proves Otello’s paternity, visually linking Desdemona to Otello through their child’s presence. This seemingly extraneous character thereby provides a spectacle of Desdemona’s racial “begriming,” as the sexual transfer of race from Otello to Desdemona is visualized in the dually marked body of their offspring rather than in an image of her pregnancy.

Otello’s and Desdemona’s child does not fully enact amalgamation, however, but maintains racial dualism as marking upon—rather than in—his body. Young Otello is not a representation of a mixed-race person, but a metaphor for one, providing visual and material evidence of his genealogical past. Bearing race unmixed upon his skin, the child bears witness to Otello and Desdemona’s sexual encounter and illustrates the reverse genealogy by which Desdemona’s begriming might also be understood. Here audiences saw a character other than Otello represented in blackface; a character connected to—and having emerged from—the body of Desdemona. Rice’s presentation of Desdemona’s racially-mixed child suggests, even as it does not depict, her literal embodiment of the racial Other in pregnancy. If Desdemona is able to reproduce blackness, the chorus’ suggestion of a “black” Desdemona is not unthinkable. They argue in the play’s final scene, “If his wife hab but been black, / Instead of white, all
had been right." While Rice did not go so far as to represent a Blackface Desdemona, other minstrel adaptations of *Othello* did. I turn to such representations in the next section.

**Blackface Desdemona**

Taking further liberties with *Othello*, minstrel productions sometimes complicated the play's usual paradigm of black/white and male/female binaries by having characters *other* than Othello appear in blackface. While historical commentary on minstrel shows has not been as carefully documented as that on traditional or "high" theatrical productions, such as John Quincy Adams's musings on *Othello*, extant manuscripts of minstrel adaptations reveal highly complex theorizations of Desdemona's race and sexuality. Minstrel productions perform white racist anxieties about white womanhood by making Desdemona's "begriming" more explicit than in the various blackface makeup mishaps discussed earlier. Texts, such as *Othello; A Burlesque, As Performed By Griffin & Christy's Minstrels. At Their Opera House, New York, 1866* and the anonymously penned *Desdemonum, An Ethiopian Burlesque, in Three Scenes*, published by the Happy Hours Company in 1874, extend blackface performance beyond the title role. Tavia Nyong'o describes blackface minstrelsy as a display of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque—a hierarchical reversal of "topsy-turvydom"—rather than as evidence of race as simply performative. In this, he observes minstrelsy's "facility for inverting, burlesquing, and blackening anything"—even, as we see here, the "fair" Desdemona's iconic whiteness. In the adaptations I discuss in this section, Desdemona has been blackened in this way. She is replaced by the figure I call Blackface Desdemona, a character who is not white, even as she recalls her iconic white namesake, but who has already been "begrimed" as the play begins.

English illustrator Charles Hunt's 1834 depiction of *Othello*’s final scene shows a version of Desdemona that might best illustrate Blackface Desdemona. [See figure 3] Hunt's Desdemona is not represented as an actual black woman, but rather—as in the minstrel "wench" stock character and in most nineteenth-century depictions of black people—a caricature of one. Just as this illustration is clearly not interested in any realistic representation of black womanhood, neither are readings of begrimed or blackface Desdemona interested in realistic representations of white
womanhood. This is not to say that Desdemona’s usual representation is offensive in the same way as blackface portrayals like Hunt’s caricature. However, both the black and the white caricature are similarly constructed, depending upon the same set of assumptions about race, gender, and sexuality. Reading Desdemona’s sexual purity as inextricable from her whiteness (even whiteness that is impermanent, capable of “begriming”) demands assumptions about black women as sexually “impure.”

Representations of Blackface Desdemona reveal the transferability of these similarly racist constructions of black and white womanhood.

Griffin’s and Christy’s burlesque draws upon a practice not uncommon in post-Civil War minstrelsy, the depiction of white ethnics in blackface. In this production, Iago is coded as Irish (singing an air entitled “Ireland the Place Is” in the third scene) and adopting an Irish
accent in the textual rendition (e.g., dropping the final “g” in “darlin’” and “amazin’”). Brabantio, Desdemona’s father, is represented as German, his dialogue also marked by a distinct accent (my becomes “mine,” with becomes “mit,” think becomes “tink,” etc.).

Even more interestingly, neither Othello nor Desdemona’s speech is marked by dialect. Their dialogue appears in standard English, which here appears as the most “Shakespearian” language of the play, much of it written in rhymed iambic pentameter, sometimes spoken, sometimes sung. Strikingly, Desdemona’s accent does not resemble her father’s but Othello’s. If marked language is an indication of racial or ethnic designation—as is often the case in the minstrel tradition—, Othello and Desdemona are aligned. Or, if we take the marked speech of Iago and Brabantio as designating national or geographic associations—as dialect often does—, both Othello and Desdemona belong in the American South: their early love-duet is sung to the tune of “Dixie,” as the happy couple plan their future life together “Away, away, &c.,” presumably in Dixieland, as the song goes.

Although the nature of blackface performance often compels scholars to focus on visual rather than linguistic or aural representations of race, Desdemona and Othello’s shared blackface is reinforced by this additional resemblance. Audiences would have easily perceived this alignment, if only in its difference from standard depictions of Desdemona’s racial difference from Othello. This adaptation correlates dialect (here indicating geographical origin rather than race), visual resemblance, and kinship in a way that standard presentations of Othello do not. Oddly, despite these complications of linguistic and visual representation, the interracial romance plot is still central to this adaptation. The end of the Dixie tune marks a point of racial difference, as Desdemona sings “I’ll love you dearly all my life, / Although you are a nigger.”

Another significant difference lies in the final scene, as Othello never realizes Desdemona’s faultfulness. In this manner, the burlesque includes Desdemona’s murder but omits Othello’s remorseful suicide. This absence of remorse recalls John Quincy Adams’s unsympathetic reading of Desdemona’s death, in which we see the full extent of his fear of interracial heterosexuality. Adams writes, “This character [Desdemona] takes from us so much of the sympathetic interest in her sufferings, that when Othello smothers her in bed, the terror and the pity subside immediately into the sentiment that she has her just deserts.” It is impossible, of course, to imagine how close Adams’s sentiment might have been to that of Griffin’s and Christy’s audiences, but the burlesque’s
ending, with the murder of Desdemona remaining unpunished, suggests a similar refusal to sympathize with Shakespeare’s heroine despite the minstrel play’s ostensibly comic tone. Leaving Desdemona’s devotion to Othello unrevealed de-emphasizes her virtue in marital fidelity, while retaining the sexual desire with which Adams is so uncomfortable.

Desdememonum differs most obviously from Griffin’s and Christy’s adaptation in its language. This play has no white-ethnic coded characters; the entire cast (here portraying the roles of Desdemoonum, Oteller, lagum, Brabantium, etc.) speak in a similarly inflected minstrel dialect, all deriving from the town of “Wennie.” By not distinguishing Othello and Desdemona’s dialect as unique, this version resists what Rice’s Otello accomplishes—Otello’s linguistic segregation. Although the dialect of Desdemoonum is clearly racialized, the absence of linguistic difference between Oteller and the other characters has somewhat of an equalizing effect: Oteller’s speech isn’t explicitly marked as different from the play’s white characters, as is the case with many derogatory representations of black characters in nineteenth-century literature and theatrical performance. Despite this shared dialect and blackface representation, however, blackness still signifies racial difference. In Desdemoonum’s first duet with Oteller, she underscores the medium of blackface performance, proclaiming “since burnt-cork am de fashion, I’ll not be behind – / I’ll see Oteller’s wisage in his highfautin’ mind.” Desdemoonum not only lauds Oteller’s blackface as fashionable but also “puts on” the “fashion” of burnt-cork herself. Still, the text frames blackness as undesirable as Brabantio familiarly argues that Oteller has “bewitched her, dat’s de matter; come de Hoodoo on de gal. / He’s played de black art on her.” Later, he asks if Desdemoonum truly devotes herself “To dat Jamaica nig? Why, gal you’re blind,” to which she replies again, “I see de feller’s wisage in his mind; / Beauty’s but skin deep anyhow you know.” Neither Desdemona’s trivialization of appearance nor the equalizing of blackface can be taken as a simple dismissal of race’s importance, however. In the context of blackface minstrelsy, appearance always signifies.

As Desdemoonum presents the spectacle of Blackface Desdemona, “put on” in burnt-cork fashion, one wonders what to make of her whiteness. Desdemoonum, like the other characters, seems to have been meant as comical, but a more serious commentary on race underlies this complex intertwining of blackface and drag performance. Joyce Green MacDonald argues that in this adaptation “a minstrel in drag playing Shakespeare’s heroine firmly muzzles the sexual and cross-racial horrors
incited by Shakespeare’s climax.” Yet, the “horrors” of Desdemona’s racialization emerge in this medium. Othello tells Desdemonom upon their elopement, “De hour am propitious —come, my darling flame! / Dey say dat in de dark, al cullers am de same.” This reference to the dark’s homogenization of color immediately precedes an embrace that evokes popular cultural images of Othello’s and Desdemona’s racial and sexual scandal despite their shared gender and blackface appearance. At first this seems like just a slightly bawdy joke (even evoking less vivid imagery than the original text), but herein lies a more complex theorization of amalgamation and a critique of racial dualism.

Blackface Desdemona is no white woman. Her appearance not only in blackface but also in drag further complicates these two adaptations’ representations of race and gender. For reasons of space, I cannot discuss drag performance at length here but do so in a longer version of this work. Suffice to say, Blackface Desdemona was played by a white man, also putting relations of white masculine power to black womanhood on spectacle. White men’s blackface performance evoked black women even as they failed to represent them. An antiracist feminist reading of these minstrel plays must therefore account for their simultaneous exclusion and evocation of black women.

Conclusion: Black Women’s Shadows

“The grand omission of Othellophilia,” Daileader writes, is “the black woman in Desdemona’s shadow.” A 1997 production of Othello featured a “photonegative” casting in which lead actor Patrick Stewart—happily—did not appear in blackface and most other parts were played by black actors. Desdemona was played by the Jamaican-born black actor, Patrice Johnson. In light of this character’s historically iconic whiteness, one must ask: what does it mean to render Desdemona “black”? Rendering Desdemona in blackface performs a theory of racialization’s relation to sexuality, suggesting that Desdemona’s blackness is a result of her having taken a black lover. Literalizing this theoretical relationship between race and sexuality, Blackface Desdemona relies upon stereotypes of race, gender, and sexuality, caricaturing black women rather than representing them. Patrice Johnson is most definitely not the equivalent of “Blackface Desdemona.” I introduce the image of a black woman portraying Desdemona in order to remind us of actual black women—rather than blackface ones—in the world and on the stage. The deliberate, political omission of
black women in popular repetitions of Desdemona and Othello occurs in a broader context of what Moya Zakia Bailey has termed "misogynoir," describing "the particular brand of hatred directed at black women in American visual & popular culture." Black women are harmed by these derogatory representations. Understanding Desdemona's racialization necessitates thinking about how black women are implied by Desdemona's "begriming." As various scholars have argued, black women do figure in Othello's margins.

In his racist critique of Desdemona, John Quincy Adams asks, "Who, in real life, would have her for his sister, daughter, or wife?" This rhetorical question illuminates the connection between Desdemona's sexuality and kinship relations. If Desdemona's marriage to Othello renders her somehow unfit for white kinship, this question has been answered. Who claims kinship with women who have sexual relations with black men? Black people. If racialization is, in part, a process of establishing kinship relations, Desdemona's blackening is not simply (or necessarily) an articulation of her racial identification but of her racialized relations.

The metaphor of blacking makeup in Blackface Desdemona indicates how race is imagined to move in "horizontal" relations of sexual kinship. This flow of racialization answers Adams's question of who would have Desdemona as kin by indicating how her kinship to Othello is prioritized and how it constructs race. This kind of queer genealogical movement is one basis for racist anxieties about interracial sex. Blackface Desdemona provides an ur-text not only for this movement but for race's theorization as both material and "legible" upon the skin. Blackface Desdemona presents an example of how race was "read" into the body.

In the minstrel plays I have discussed, we see black women simultaneously hinted at and omitted in Blackface Desdemona, in which the layering of white masculinity, white femininity, and black femininity converge. Blackface Desdemona appears, much like Othello, neither as an accurate representation of "whiteness" nor of "blackness" but as a visualization of how (gendered) race is theorized in these representations. Representations of Blackface Desdemona in the nineteenth-century social/cultural imaginary offer an alternative theorization of normative genealogies of racial inheritance. These minstrel productions reveal theories of racial construction that are more complex than those generally assumed to be available in this nineteenth-century context.
Endnotes

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1. William Shakespeare, *Othello: The Moor of Venice: Texts and Contexts*, ed. Kim F. Hall (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2007). Further citations of *Othello* refer to this edition and will be cited as “act.scene.line.” Shakespeare’s Folio and Quarto differ here; the former reading “My name” and the latter reading “Her name.” I quote the quarto’s “Her” because this is the text in all but two of over two-dozen nineteenth-century American editions I have examined.

2. Blackface performances perpetuated racist stereotypes. There were all-African-American productions of *Othello* in the nineteenth century and productions involving Native American people. *Othello* was also played by Afro-British and African American actors (such as Ira Aldridge) in Europe. However, *Othello* was not played by a black man with an accompanying white cast in the U.S. until Paul Robeson’s groundbreaking, controversial performance in 1943.


11. On the history of this hyper-visible relationship between black men and white women, see Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).
23. Benjamin Rush, “Observations Intended to Favour a Supposition that the Black Color (as it is called) of the Negroes is Derived from Leprosy,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 4 (1799): 294.
31. Shakespeare, *Othello*, 1.2.63, 73.
33. Ibid, 244, 245.
41. Rice, *Othello*, 120.
42. Ibid.
43. See Rice, *Othello*, 176, n. 37, and Lhamon, “Introduction,” xxii, note to Figure 1.
44. Rice, *Othello*, 158.
45. Happy Hours Company, “Desdemomum: An Ethiopian Burlesque, in Three Scenes,” in *This Grotesque Essence: Plays from the American Minstrel Stage*, ed. Gary D. Engle (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1874 [reprint 1978]). Engle and others hold that Griffin’s burlesque was probably first performed in 1866. It is possible that Desdomonum was performed earlier than 1874. See *This Grotesque Essence*, 69.
47. Ibid, 108.
50. Literary critics (ranging from George Philip Krapp in the 1920s to Eric Lott and Michael North in the 1990s) have shown that representations of dialect do more complex work than simply present phonetic representations of speech.
52. Ibid.
55. Ibid, 65.
56. Ibid.
57. Gross notes the irony of Desdemona’s “blacked up” appearance. See *Shakespeare’s Noise*, 103.
58. Joyce Green MacDonald, “Acting Black: Othello, Othello Burlesques, and the


60. Similarly, Dympna Callaghan notes, “if Othello was a white man, so was Desdemona.” See Callaghan, *Shakespeare Without Women*, 76.


