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## Facial Recognition and Posthuman Technologies in Shakespeare's Sonnets

**Abstract:** The human face, real and imagined, has long figured into various forms of cultural and personal recognition—to include citizenship, in both the modern and the ancient world. But beyond affiliations related to borders and government, the human face has also figured prominently into biometrics that feed posthuman questions and anxieties. For while one requirement of biometrics is concerned with “unicity,” or that which identifies an individual as unique, another requirement is that it identify “universality,” confirming an individual’s membership in the species. Shakespeare’s sonnets grapple with the crisis of encountering a universal beauty in a unique specimen to which Time and Nature nonetheless afford no special privilege. Between fair and dark lies a posthuman lament over the injustice of natural law and the social valorizations arbitrarily marshaled to defend it.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare’s sonnets, facial recognition, Dark Lady, fair youth, Nature, Time, posthumanism, biometrics, face, Woody Bledsoe.

The event precipitating this inquiry into Shakespeare and posthuman experience is fictional. It is what happens in Shakespeare’s sonnet 126—something unforgivable: and it happens to the speaker as witness to the terrible negotiation between Nature and Time resulting in the death of the fair youth. The death does not itself occur in sonnet 126, but its projection is guaranteed there by nonhuman agents working against human beings. After sonnet 126, the speaker takes a dramatic turn away from certain aspects of life to which he had earlier paid fealty, namely: a commitment to biological reproduction, a celebration of idealized forms, and a preoccupation with aging and death. In light of the fair youth’s final consignment to death, a certain recognition comes over the speaker of the sonnets, and it has to do with his sudden insight into something Giorgio

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Agamben and others call a “state of exception.”<sup>1</sup> But while this term has been used to describe the casting of human life into a limbo between *bios* and *zoe*, human life and bare life, accomplishing its temporary dehumanization and opening the possibility for genocide,<sup>2</sup> for Shakespeare’s speaker the realization is that Nature and Time have always already conspired to dehumanize what human beings take for granted about their humanity. Definitions of dignity, justice, empathy, and the exceptionalism of the human soul have never been integrated into any credible perspective of Nature or Time who, in an admittedly difficult imaginary for them, are nonetheless agents equally associated with indignity, injustice, cruelty, and soullessness. Despite their personification (and Nature’s “doting” attitude toward the youth in Sonnet 20, for example), Nature and Time clearly remain indifferent to the way human beings perceive themselves as special, a stance critically scrutinized in posthumanist theory.

The quasi-deified status of Nature and Time in the sonnets is particularly felt given the total absence in the sonnets of any reference to theological paradigms about the God of monotheism or of Christianity.<sup>3</sup> God apparently does not enter the speaker’s mind as he wrestles with the sonnets and their expression. His consciousness is not centered around religious convictions in the least. And yet, he struggles with Nature and Time in a familiar kind of theological agony. The procreation sonnets, with their obsessive obedience to Nature’s perceived dictum to propagate, ultimately struggle free from Nature’s imperative through a championing of the capacity of writing to produce equally good if not better terms of reproduction for the youth. This struggle progresses quite clearly in sonnets 15, 16, 17, and 18, where the gardener’s imperfect “graft” yields to a “pupil pen,” then seeks only corroboration in the companion child, and finally triumphs (somewhat inexplicably) with a sudden confidence that “this gives life to thee,” where “this” is the poem itself.<sup>4</sup>

But “this” declared triumph for writing as an act of reproduction is a challenge for readers, particularly as they expect that a reproduction of the

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<sup>1</sup> See Mordini and Massari 494; Agamben sources this term to Carl Schmitt’s 1922 work *Political Theology*, where a definition of the sovereign is “he who decides on the state of exception” (Agamben, *State of Exception* 1). See also Agamben’s account of the debate over the term between Schmitt and Walter Benjamin (*State of Exception*, “Gigantomachy Concerning a Void,” 52-64).

<sup>2</sup> Agamben draws on Foucault’s formulation that the sovereignty of government makes possible the ability of the social sciences “both to protect life and to authorize a holocaust” (Foucault, *Dits et écrits*, 3:719; quoted in Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 3).

<sup>3</sup> Not all would agree that the sonnets are secular and theologically empty: see McCoy on religious sacrifice and Hokama on prayer in the sonnets.

<sup>4</sup> This progression has been generally observed; see especially, however, Nardizzi’s excellent discussion of the gardening metaphor of grafting as it relates to writing, “Shakespeare’s Penknife.”

youth will include a depiction of his face. Like all literature, Shakespeare's sonnets struggle with the face. Because language is not pictorial but verbal, the effort to produce credible imagery in language is tenuous at best. Here is why one is usually disappointed by books turned into film: the literalization of story into picture rarely matches the private imagination of the reader. And it is fair to say that each reader's private imagination cannot match that of the original author, who was the first to envision the words' original imagery. Shakespeare's sonnets pose a similar problem: no one can say with finality what the fair youth and the dark lady look like. We know one of these is a universal beauty, and the other is definitionally not. The two beloveds in the sequence—the fair youth and the dark lady—represent distinct facial brands. The youth has a face that makes him adored by everyone, and the lady has a face adored only by the speaker.

What makes the sonnets posthuman in their gesture, however, is their purported effort to capture and record human faces without actually doing so. Their celebration of the face of the beloved is an early modern version of a “deep fake,” in that they purposely falsify what are really only impressions of facial recognition. The sonnets are in fact a story of facial misrecognition, then, or of reference without referents. The human is everywhere referred to by the sonnets but nowhere captured in them. To understand facial misrecognition in the early modern period, one needs to remember that when Shakespeare was writing, painting or drawing was nearly the only way to present a person's face in their absence.<sup>5</sup> And the sonnets acknowledge this by referring back to Nature's ability to paint: the youth's face is “with nature's own hand painted” (Sonnet 20). The invention of photography, of course, changed the stakes entirely for reproducing faces. In almost an opposite way to writing, modern cameras incessantly now capture the faces of human beings with what appears to be reliable precision. Human beings have probably always been obsessed with recognizing one another: One's eyes naturally dart to the eyes of another whenever another human being is in one's field of vision. And so a desire for the eventual technology of photography is not a surprising historical development.

But why should Shakespeare's sonnets remain engaging? If their effort of reproduction has been outpaced by technology, why do we continue to read about two faces that remain elusive and remote because of the inadequacy of

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<sup>5</sup> In recent decades, art historians have reevaluated Renaissance portraiture as more than the “mere copying of mundane appearances” and more profoundly a record of ideas “on the identity and the importance of the individual . . . , on memory and mortality, on the religious or social advancement of personages, or on the metaphysical justification of the self” (Rogers 375); for an excellent discussion of identity in Renaissance portraiture, in which empirical likeness was of only secondary importance, see Loh, “Renaissance Faciality.”

language? Would two photographs have served well enough as a replacement for these poems (see Figures 1 and 2)? I think the obvious answer is that there is something that remains nonetheless compelling precisely about failing to capture the face. And in terms of new technologies related to image duplication, there is also something concomitantly eerie about capturing a face too well. Modern technologies of facial recognition are as alienating, perhaps, as they are reassuring, and it may be because the technology does not advance a constituent set of ethics or ethical encounter. In fact, with the removal of the photographer, who at least has the capacity to bring ethical editing into the frame of the image, photographs taken with nonhuman surveillance technology and then analyzed by artificial intelligence for biometric markers of identification, for example, are strictly speaking unfettered by human ethics.



Fig. 1. Fair Youth:

<https://thispersondoesnotexist.com/>



Fig. 2. Dark Lady:

<https://generated.photos/faces>

Figures 1 and 2 are unique faces but not of real people. They are both deep fakes generated by artificial intelligence and facial learning software

In the language of one researcher into facial recognition experimentation, who is observing without any special view to the ethics of the science, the face is “our most varied attribute. Fourteen bones provide the underlying structure for the face, and these bones differ in size and shape from one person to another. A layer of fatty tissue that varies in thickness and smoothness across individuals also contributes to individual differences. This tissue separates the skin from the interconnected and criss-crossing pattern of more than 100 muscles, which permit variation in facial expression” (Liggett, cited in Seamon 363). The abstraction of the face to its component parts and features—ironically not unlike the Renaissance literary blazon (see Figures 3 and 4)—has clear dehumanizing effects as the face becomes an organ as

impersonal and interchangeable as a lung or liver.<sup>6</sup> It is not surprising that one of the earliest efforts of facial recognition A.I. involved algorithms for racializing the face alongside such identifications as gender and age.<sup>7</sup>



Fig. 3. Woodcut printed in 1654 parodying the literary blazon of the face through a literalization of Petrarchan metaphors. (Sorel 24)

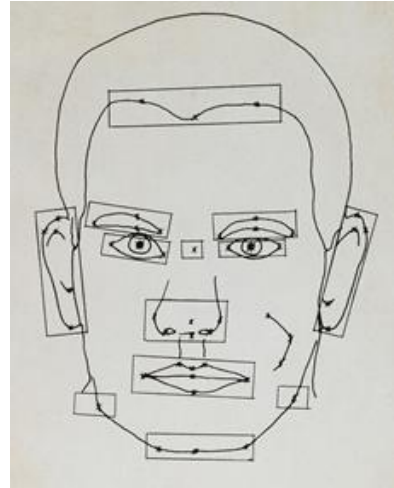


Fig. 4. Drawing from facial recognition pioneer Woody Bledsoe's papers, captioned "Points on the Face Divided into Natural Subsets for Use in the GROUPS Program." (Detail of a photo by Dan Winters; see Raviv)

<sup>6</sup> In fact, the face became an "organ" in American medical nomenclature on July 3, 2014, with the advancement of techniques for its transplantation from one body to another; see Taylor-Alexander, "How the Face Became an Organ."

<sup>7</sup> Raviv reports that "In March 1965—some 50 years before China would begin using facial pattern-matching to identify ethnic Uighurs in Xinjiang Province—Woody [Bledsoe, an early pioneer of facial recognition] had proposed to the Defense Department Advanced Research Projects Agency, then known as Arpa, that it should support Panoramic [Bledsoe's company] to study the feasibility of using facial characteristics to determine a person's racial background. 'There exists a very large number of anthropological measurements which have been made on people throughout the world from a variety of racial and environmental backgrounds,' he wrote. 'This extensive and valuable store of data, collected over the years at considerable expense and effort, has not been properly exploited'" ("Secret History of Facial Recognition"); see Perkowitz, "Bias in the Machine," and Williams, "Fitting the Description," on racial disparities and injustices in facial recognition; see also Tsui for ethical calls within facial recognition research related to gender and gender-neutrality.

In their superb 2008 article on biometrics for the journal *Bioethics*, Emilio Mordini and Sonia Massari recall that in ancient Greece, the word for slave was *aprosopon*, literally “faceless one,” and that the Greek word for face, *prosopon*, would become the root of the Latin word for “person” (497). Their investigation into biometrics includes a contemplation of generalized citizenship as inflected by history and the advent of the distribution of unique identity credentials, such as the passport: “This new citizen is an unmarked individual who is uniquely and reliably distinguishable as an inhabitant of a nation-state, and not as a member of a guild, village, manor or parish” (496). Biometrics such as fingerprinting and facial recognition analysis (of which the photo ID is perhaps the most widely used) would develop as key guarantors of state assignments of identity.

The human face, real and imagined, has therefore long figured into various forms of cultural and personal recognition—to include citizenship, in both the modern and the ancient world. But beyond affiliations related to borders and government, the human face has also figured prominently into biometrics that feed posthuman questions and anxieties. For while one requirement of biometrics is concerned with “unicity,” or that which identifies an individual as unique, another requirement is that it identify “universality,” confirming an individual’s membership in the species.<sup>8</sup> Individuals have unique faces, in other words, but the fact that they have a face at all is a pre-condition of the most basic recognition of human, social, and political identity.

When computers begin to collect biometric markers, which they do faster and more reliably than human beings can, the posthuman nature of that work grows even more obvious. What makes biometrics of concern to posthuman theory is that faces are common across an array of animal species, too. And the automation of facial recognition must contend with this fact through well-articulated algorithms that draw distinctions between the human and the nonhuman animal. When a computer surveillance system searches for a human face, it must distinguish between what is human and what is not, but this means ultimately that it must acknowledge the animal face in order to disqualify it from (or otherwise include it in) consideration. The extension of human traits to nonhuman species excites one branch of posthuman investigation that is eager to deconstruct human exceptionalism in view of a world ecology that strains under that self-centered paradigm.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The other two basic requirements for biometric identifiers along with “unicity” and “universality” are “collectability” and “permanence” (Mordini and Massari 489).

<sup>9</sup> The field of animal studies in Renaissance literature is burgeoning, as is the study of non-animal ecologies similarly affected by human exceptionalism. See as a representative example Laurie Shannon, “Poor, Bare, Forked”; see also Campana and Maisano’s edited collection *Renaissance Posthumanism*.

But the technology of biometrics also informs posthuman theory precisely because it relies on computers and artificial intelligence, which prove superior in their capacity to perform originally human tasks. In consideration of what may prove insurmountable limitations on human understanding—i.e., the capacity, speed, and even cognitive reach of the human brain, constrained by the biology of evolution—the branch of posthuman life represented by A.I. poses a plausible potential for computing to develop superiority not only in speed and capacity but even in the area of cognition.<sup>10</sup> While the ethics of A.I. remain a human problem, the A.I. of the future, after algorithmic controls are necessarily relaxed in favor of deep learning strategies, may well look more like the neutral surveillance that already exists, which gathers data without a clear ethical paradigm in place for its collection.

“Function creep” is the industry term for technologies that begin to develop in ways that they were not originally intended to fulfill. Here is where the real problem of ethics can be most acutely felt because technologies that are purposeful usually will attempt to grapple with the ethics of their use. But when a technology becomes useful in some borrowed capacity, the use often migrates ahead of the ethicists because of its sheer utility. The convenience, for example, of being able to convert a surveillance image into personal information about identity runs ahead of the researchers who are merely measuring the bones of a face to see if the computer can match separate images taken at different angles. As Mordini and Massari explain, “function creep” usually involves a “policy vacuum,” where no guidebook has been written to govern or steer a technology’s application (490).

In part, this clarifies Giorgio Agamben’s public objection to boarding a plane for the United States because of the requirement that he be photographed and fingerprinted on arrival, a government policy he compared to the tattooing of Holocaust prisoners (Agamben, “No to Bio-Political Tattooing”; Mordini and Massari 494). Without special algorithms invented and encoded by human beings, a database of biometric data functions very much like Nature and Time in the sonnets, who document human life, take note of its rise and decline, record

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<sup>10</sup> There is a suspicion among those at the vanguard of scientific knowledge that human learning may not be capable of grasping certain truths about the universe, based on structural deficiencies in the human mind as a residual limitation of biological evolution. In a 2017 broadcast event from the 92nd Street Y in New York, the American physicist Neil deGrasse Tyson commented on this suspicion: “I wonder if in fact the human intellect is sufficient to actually decode the full operations of this universe in which we live” (1:15:26-40), adding, “but that doesn’t mean I shouldn’t dream of that frontier” (1:20:45-53). He concludes the talk even more soberly with: “The larger grows the area of knowledge . . . so too grows our perimeter of ignorance. It may be that as much as we think we know . . . for all we know, we could be steeped in the center of infinite ignorance” (1:21:37-22:19).



markers of gender, race, and age, and steer its generational movement, all with a keenly felt indifference.

But facial recognition—not the misrecognition that seems to mark the sonnets—has proven problematic even in the sphere of the ethical encounter. In their introduction to a special issue of *Criticism* devoted to posthumanist literary study, Steven Swarbrick and Karen Raber (citing Claire Colebrook) analyze the human face so critical to the ethical encounter that Emmanuel Levinas proposed and that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari shortly after criticized as “always Western, European, white, and male” (Swarbrick and Raber 319) and not even, in fact, a face at all but a trope for “the inhuman in human beings.”<sup>11</sup> Purporting to identify the special in-group status of all human beings and what they share at a minimum in order to relate ethically to one another, the Levinasian face, in the estimation of its critics, collapses humanity into a flat universality that both denies variety and aberrancy within human encounter and somehow also promotes human exceptionalism over and against the rest of the animal and natural world. In concert with these critics and with Bruno Latour, who rejects modernity as having never actually happened and looks to the sixteenth century as the “nonmodern” present’s closest mirror and intellectual ally,<sup>12</sup> Swarbrick and Raber suggest that the ubiquitous motif of the face in Renaissance literature—not only of the human figure in all manner of human form, but of objects, too, such as that of clocks and of the sun—make the Shakespearean text ripe for posthumanist recastings and new critiques of Levinasian faciality. And I think this is particularly true for the sonnets, where faciality proves a consistent concern: “Look in thy glass, and tell the face thou viewest, / Now is the time that face should form another” (Sonnet 3); “A woman’s face with Nature’s own hand painted / Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion” (Sonnet 20); “Methinks no face so gracious is as mine” (Sonnet 62); “Look in your glass, and there

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<sup>11</sup> Deleuze and Guattari 176, quoted in Swarbrick and Raber 319. With their typical flamboyance, Deleuze and Guattari write: “The face is not a universal. It is not even that of the white man; it is White Man himself, with his broad white cheeks and the black hole of his eyes. The face is Christ. The face is the typical European, what Ezra Pound called the average sensual man, in short, the ordinary everyday Erotomaniac” (176). See also Raber’s earlier work on Shakespearean faces in the context of posthumanism, *Shakespeare and Posthumanist Theory*, 74-88; see also Knapp’s excellent edited collection of chapters about the face in Shakespeare.

<sup>12</sup> Latour, “Attempt,” 480; cited in Swarbrick and Raber, 315. In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour clarifies his position: “So is modernity an illusion? No, it is much more than an illusion and much less than an essence. It is a force added to others that for a long time it had the power to represent, to accelerate, or to summarize—a power that it no longer holds” (40); he adds: “Would I then be, literally, postmodern? Postmodernism is a symptom, not a fresh solution. It lives under the modern Constitution, but it no longer believes in the guarantees the Constitution offers” (46).



appears a face / That overgoes my blunt invention quite" (Sonnet 103). Mirrors and faces obsess and haunt Shakespeare's speaker, making image recognition and misrecognition a central concern of the sequence in anticipation of post-human considerations about values found there.

### Misrecognitions of Facial Beauty in the Sonnets

In his earliest facial reference, Shakespeare's speaker urges the young man to "Look in thy glass, and tell the face thou viewest / Now is the time that face should form another" (Sonnet 3). The direction to "form another" face is at its simplest an attempt to move the youth to recognize that his current enjoyable place in the world's youngest generation is on track to expire: the relevance of his beauty is fleeting, and its persistence will depend entirely on its fresh reproduction in the face of a child. But the direction also overdetermines the face as a site of value for the youth: his beauty resides entirely there, as the sequence repeatedly confirms.

It may be tempting to interpret the sonnets' attention to the youth's face as merely figurative of the more holistic beauty presumed to be associated with human beings in their full emotional and cognitive expression. But when the sequence asserts a different type of beauty in the dark lady sonnets to come, it nonetheless remains defensive about what superficially disqualifies that beauty through failures specific to the face: "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun" (Sonnet 130) but rather, because dark, "they mourners seem" (Sonnet 127) in the context of a face-oriented culture. The fair youth's beauty, then, in light of the defensiveness of the dark lady's lack of beauty, is reconfirmed as part of the physicality of the face. Though he does not perform one, it is as though the speaker has earlier participated in a blazon of the youth's face in just the way he parodies such a blazon in Sonnet 130. But the distinction is not simply one of beauty because a different love detached from physical beauty is newly found in the sequence:

In faith, I do not love thee with mine eyes,  
For they in thee a thousand errors note,  
But 'tis my heart that loves what they despise,  
Who in despite of view is pleased to dote. (Sonnet 141)

The abrupt turn in the sequence, however, from the fair youth with his universal beauty to the dark lady with an appeal that is strictly unique to the speaker, is not predicated on unfair distinctions to be drawn between standards of beauty, superficial or not, racial or otherwise oriented. The crisis of Sonnet 126 has more to do with what happens to the fair youth, who has been extolled as the epitome

of human beauty and therefore a sort of destination or apex of biological achievement—something eerily akin to later claims to an idealized Aryan biology. In Sonnet 126, the speaker suddenly realizes again what he already knew from the start, that the youth will be subject to decay and death just like everyone else in possession of a face. His face does not provide any special advantage to him in the end, despite an apparently intense interest in him paid by Nature. If ever Nature could find occasion to make an exception to the fate that all human beings share, this was the specimen to inspire that. And yet, Sonnet 126 sees her conceding to Time and paying the debt of the fair youth's longer-than-usual beauty by "render[ing]" him up in the end.

The crisis of the sequence, then, is not over designations of beauty but in the speaker's ultimate recognition that beauty is merely an exploitable tool of Nature that renders no special benefit beyond generational reproduction. The fair youth might just as well be ugly as beautiful when passing from the hands of Nature to Time, for Nature and Time are both indifferent to his special preservation or survival. It becomes particularly clear that Nature, who has some capacity to assign life expectancy to her creations, and does so differently across species, is not oriented toward individuals but rather toward species and their more general survival through generations.

Not even the quiet revolution against Time and Nature that the speaker mounts at the conclusion of the procreation sonnets—when he declares that his poetry can immortalize the youth—changes biological facts about any actual person's life. In its immediate articulation, after all, the speaker still depends on human agents and their eyes reading the paper on which the poetry is written. His imagination, in other words, has not branched into the posthuman potential of a nonhuman reader of text to receive and interpret his poetry. But the declaration does gesture to a posthuman condition, at least for the youth. If words on a page endure longer than human lives and are more easily and reliably duplicated there, then the youth is in some lesser degree of danger of disappearing from the earth despite Nature and Time continuing in their usual way.

But this does not seem to be a satisfactory achievement for the speaker, who does not recall the youth (arguably) after he disappears from the sequence.<sup>13</sup> The speaker abandons the youth in fact. Everyone knows that the youth has not died yet—it will take half a lifetime still for that to happen. So why is the youth so summarily abandoned, if not in protest to the terrible realization about Nature and Time?

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<sup>13</sup> Sonnet 144 does refer to "a man right fair," but that brief reference is ambiguous in its attachment to the youth from before. Regardless of the ambiguity, the speaker quite noticeably removes the youth from view in the sequence with the formal farewell of Sonnet 126.

The individual biometric markers of the youth's face—those elements that make it beautiful—are no more significant, in other words, than the distinct but analogous markers available to view in the face of the dark lady. Despite distinctions of valorization made by the immediate human culture observing them, the preference imagined to be expressed for one over another by Nature proves insubstantial and purely capricious. It does not yield a meaningful benefit from a posthuman point of view. The face merely has a series of metrics that make it both universal and unique. In similar manner to Nature and Time, any A.I. can track those features of a given face without any special reference to its particular beauty.

What is recognized, therefore, in the human face besides its certain articulation of the common human fate of aging and death? The dark lady sonnets may try to focus a new effort against Nature's goals, imagining as the speaker does for himself a new originality in his activity of looking and evaluating that sets him apart from universal standards. But indifferent Nature, who neither appears nor gets mentioned again in the sequence following the first of the dark lady sonnets, remains a spectral presence as her posthuman status looms over the sonnets' project. For Nature is posthuman in every sense of the word: despite her literary personification, she is both nonhuman and superhuman in her reach and effect. And despite her expression of dotting preference, her resting state is proven to be one of indifference toward that small portion of global life that is occupied by human beings.

Both Nature and Time contribute in profound ways to the biometric markers that make a face a face, and a body a body. Nature's "prick[ing] out" of the youth in Sonnet 20 "for women's pleasure" is an attribution to her of the ability to assign arbitrarily the sex of a human child at birth. And Time steps in with his penciled lines at the eager onset of senescence, which happens much earlier than might be imagined, as the sequence makes clear: "every thing that grows / Holds in perfection but a little moment" (Sonnet 15). Both gender and age are organizing principles around which facial recognition is oriented. And these early modern preoccupations would prove to have staying power as they also guided the earliest explorations of facial recognition through artificial intelligence in the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup>

Shakespeare's sonnets resonate with modernity because of the way they seem to invent subjectivity and inwardness. But they resonate with posthuman theory for different reasons: they invalidate human observations and ascriptions of beauty—racial and otherwise—for being slow and encumbered by valorizations that don't matter to Nature and that will not matter to truly posthuman considerations, such as those of an A.I. released from algorithmic responses.

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<sup>14</sup> See both Raviv and "A Brief History."

## Justice and the Racialization of the Face

“Every fair from fair sometime declines” (Sonnet 18): So perishes beauty. But so might the speaker’s sense of law and equity, justice, and fair obedience to the law be in similar jeopardy. “Fairness” in decline reflexes back on the law and its promises of equity and freedom from bias. “Dark” on the other hand, can refer to a clandestine law-breaking, or the secret spaces of conspirators who lie and cheat, who “in our faults by lies we flattered be” (Sonnet 138). The “Dark Web” is where laws are broken, for example: an ether-sphere of dark matter affords a space for lawlessness, but also a suspicion of the so-called “fair” laws of the sovereign state that serve some more justly than others. The disappearance of Nature in the dark lady sonnets—her suppression by the speaker—is readable as a denouncement of laws that decline toward something unfair. And yet the speaker must quickly understand his own participation in a human version of that indifferent justice. The face of the fair youth, extolled for its superlative beauty, is not in the end owed special advantage by any true measure of justice. And the speaker engages in a compensatory swerve away from his sycophantic fawning on Nature and Time, who spur in him a frantic effort to marshal attention around the one good specimen on which to focus all of humanity’s hopes, dreams, and eyes. In turning away from Nature and Time, but Nature in particular,<sup>15</sup> Shakespeare’s speaker seeks refuge in a renegade space that is in defiance of conventional jurisdiction, with a lady who is dark, childless, and “rare” (Sonnet 130).

Although it is unfair to bring them into too close a constellation, Shakespeare’s speaker shares something of this swerve with the 1960s pioneer in facial recognition technology, Woody Bledsoe. Bledsoe, who early stressed the capacity of his technology to identify race (as related in note 7) made a further indirect allusion to race in a much later address to the American Association for Artificial Intelligence, which he delivered as its president. That address, made in 1985 by a man who had already devoted two decades of his professional life to facial recognition development, was titled, “I Had a Dream,” and it began:

Twenty-five years ago I had a dream, a *daydream*, if you will. A dream shared with many of you. I dreamed of a special kind of computer, which had eyes and ears and arms and legs, in addition to its “brain.”

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<sup>15</sup> In fact, of the two, only Nature is referenced one more time after the farewell to the fair youth, at sonnet 127, the introductory sonnet to the dark lady section. Generally, Nature and Time can be said to reside squarely in the fair youth sonnets. The sonnets in which Nature appears as a proper noun are 4, 11, 20, 67, 68, 84, 126, and 127. Time, as a personified entity, is harder to distinguish from the general noun, but a conservative list would include 5, 12, 15, 16, 19, 22, 44, 55, 60, 63, 64, 65, 77, 100, 115, 116, 123, 124, and 126. Not even the general term “time,” in any case, appears after sonnet 126.

I did not dream that this new computer friend would be a means of making money for me or my employer or a help for my country—though I loved my country then and still do, and I have no objection to making money. I did not even dream of such a worthy cause as helping the poor and handicapped of the world using this marvelous new machine.

No, my dream was filled with the wild excitement of seeing a machine act like a human being. . . .

My dream computer person liked to walk and play Ping-Pong, especially with me. And I liked to teach it things—because it could learn dexterity skills as well as mental concepts. And much more.

Bledsoe's speech cannot help but reference, in a somewhat provocative parallel, Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous speech that also dreamed of a future Utopia, there entirely racial in nature. For Bledsoe, the dream extends into the posthuman realm through his allusion to the intelligible intra-human problem of race. The common gesture in both Shakespeare and the mind of a pioneer into posthuman futures, both engaging as they do a racial suggestion, racial inflection, and eventual racial communion, would seem to be in part a reaction to a deep disappointment in the current state of the human. It would seem to stem from a recognition that human law—both natural and juridical—are unfriendly to the individual organism and to whole swaths of populations even, as they focus on paradigms of Nature and Time that inspire a frantic desperation for getting the work of life done correctly and quickly. Bledsoe seems to imagine an ethical creation in his computer friend, one capable of growth and learning without accompanying decay. As a witting pioneer, Bledsoe steps into the role of Nature in the same workshop featured in Sonnet 20 as he assembles his creation for now artificial life. Shakespeare's dark lady sonnets turn similarly to an underprivileged creature of Nature, deprived of the beauty that would make her universally beloved. And the dark lady is spared by the speaker what the fair youth was not: the constant relation of her life to parenting, aging, and decay—all those things that relate her so unfairly to Nature. Both Bledsoe and Shakespeare's speaker seem to find harbor in a dream of a fairer posthumanity than currently in supply, with Nature and Time's dark indifference finally overcome in both.

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