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Interpreting *Othello* in the Arabian Gulf: Shakespeare in a Time of Blackface Controversies

Abstract: This article opens with some brief observations on the phenomenon of Arab blackface—that is, of Arab actors “blacking up” to impersonate black Arab or African characters—from classic cinematic portrayals of the warrior-poet Antara Ibn Shaddad to more recent deployments of blackface in the Arab entertainment industry. It then explores the complex nexus of race, gender, citizenship and social status in the Arabian Gulf as context for a critical reflection on the author’s experience of reading and discussing *Othello* with students at the American University of Kuwait—discussions which took place in the fall of 2019, in the midst of a wave of controversies sparked by instances of Arab blackface on television and in social media.

Keywords: Shakespeare, *Othello*, Antara Ibn Shaddad, blackface, Arab blackface, Kuwait, Egypt, Arab/ic film and theatre, Arabian Gulf.

Introduction: Blackface on the Arab World’s Screens and Stages

Blackface has a long history in the Arab entertainment industry. In Egypt, the epicenter of film production in the Middle East,¹ it was a recurrent phenomenon in the 20th century for non-black Arab actors to “black up” in order to play

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¹ In 2015 Eman Rashid estimated that over the course of its history, the Egyptian film industry had produced more than four thousand films, accounting for 75% of film production across the Arab world. It is also important to note that Egyptian cinema often looks to Hollywood and the UK and European film industries for inspiration, and some instances of blackface in the Egyptian cinema clearly borrow from Hollywood models.

African or black Arab characters. In fact, celebrated Egyptian actors like Ali Al-Kassar and Farid Shawqi² attained some of the most striking successes of their careers in blackface roles, from Al-Kassar's comedic character Othman the Nubian, to Shawqi's portrayal of the half-Arab, half-African epic hero Antara Ibn Shaddad, in Niazi Mostafa's 1961 cinematic adaptation *Antara Bin Chaddad* (translated into English as *Antar, The Black Prince*).³

While Shawqi's performance as Antara is dignified, and does not seem intended to provoke laughter at his character's expense,⁴ other instances of blackface in Egyptian cinema seem deliberately to demean Africans and black Arabs, including Egypt's sizeable and marginalized Nubian population, who hail predominantly from Upper Egypt, the country's south. Such acts serve to support a construct of Egyptian identity that is Pharaonic, Northern/Mediterranean, and Arab, by contrasting it with a Southern/African Other, rhetorically constructed as inferior in beauty, intelligence, and ability (El Hamel). And this rhetoric has persisted well into the 21st century: the 2018 compilation of "Seven Egyptian Movie Scenes that are Racist AF" by Sarah Ahmed Shawky does not include instances of blackface *per se*, but her examples—all from the 1990s through the early 2000s—illustrate the continuing occurrence of slurs against black Arabs and Africans on the Egyptian screen.

Over the course of the 20th century, the use of blackface (and also other racial prosthetics, like wigs, body padding, and so forth) gradually spread from Egypt to burgeoning entertainment industries across the region—including to

² Where Arabic titles and names have commonly used transcriptions, this article reproduces those; otherwise, Arabic words and phrases are transliterated using the ALA-LC system.

³ For more on the iconic status of Othman the Nubian within the Egyptian entertainment industry, and the character's centrality within Al-Kassar's career, see Tam. The 1961 film was Mostafa's second attempt at adapting the epic tale (Dumont 196); his 1945 film *Antar and Abba* featured the blacked-up actor Seraj Mounir as Antar, though interestingly the publicity poster for the film does not show Mounir in blackface (c.f. the film, available on YouTube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oxlQ4zmBvP8>, and the poster, here: <https://elcinema.com/en/work/1005987/gallery/123771124>).

⁴ I find arguments that try to justify or excuse some uses of blackface based on a presumed lack of intention to offend, such as the one put forward in McWhorter's "The Case for 'Blackface'", deeply problematic. The distinction suggested here—between Arab blackface that is obviously intended as an aggressive and demeaning act of mockery, and Arab blackface that does not seem motivated by active malice—should not be misconstrued as condoning any instance of the practice. Rather, the distinction is salient only insofar as it underscores a central assertion in this article: that the use of Arab blackface has actually become more insensitive and more demeaning over time, rather than less so, and that this tracks with recent upsurges in regional nativism and racism.

Kuwait, which established the Arabian Gulf's first cinema company in 1954, and which in the 1960s and 70s made rapid advances in the development of theatre and television programming. The 1979 Kuwaiti musical revue *Bisāt al-Faqīr*⁵ ["The Poor Man's Magic Carpet"], starring celebrated Kuwaiti actor Abdulhussein Abdulredha [1939-2017], contains a number of the tropes which continue to characterize Kuwaiti comedy today, such as men impersonating women, and it includes three segments in which Abdulredha darkens his skin. In the first, set in a café in Upper Egypt (complete with a bellydancer in drag), a browned-up Abdulredha leads the cafégoers in song. In the second segment, in darker makeup, Abdulredha plays Antara, in an extended spoof of scenes from the classic film—including one in which Antara's father's wife Sumaya, here played by a male actor in women's garb, tries to flirt with him. When Antara rejects her advances, she insults him using the epithet *yā aswad al-wajh* ["you black face!"], a slur repeatedly leveled at Antara in the classic film. And in the revue's final segment, Abdulredha, in brownface, performs a musical number set in India.

Such scenes defy easy characterization. The revue has very little plot, and its unifying image is that of a magic carpet that transports the main characters to communities which, the revue implies, lack material wealth but are rich in musical traditions and in social cohesion. Thus the café scene could be interpreted as a celebration, even a valorization, of Upper Egyptian culture and music, not intended to denigrate or demean; the Indian-inspired number likewise does not seem to engage in mockery of the people or the musical traditions of the subcontinent. In both of these scenes, the primary entertainment value of the segment seems to stem from the enjoyment of the musical numbers, and from the pleasure of watching Abdulredha in various forms of "racial drag,"⁶ rather than from black- or brownface being used as travesty or caricature. If anything, it is classical Arab culture and the 1961 film that the revue sends up, in the Antara sequence, which occurs midway through the revue. Abdulredha plays

⁵ A full video is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6lMko-FqA4&feature=youtu.be>. The Arabic title literally means "The Carpet of Poverty," from its central image of the flying carpet, comically complete with steering wheel. In Kuwait, the musical revue—known locally as *awbarīṭ*, from the Italian *operetta*—was a popular genre in the 1970s and 80s. My sincere thanks to Hasan Hajjiah for bringing this performance to my attention.

⁶ This is Elise Marks' term for the "tricky combination of 'strangeness' and 'kinship'" that provides "an emotional thrill ride" for audience members watching a white actor playing Othello in blackface (Marks 116). Though the Kuwaiti revue is not exactly a thrill ride (it is much more "It's a Small World" than it is Space Mountain) Abdulredha's performance of black Arab, Indian, or half-black/half-Arab characters seems intended to evoke a similar combination of feelings for Kuwaiti and Gulf audience members.

the character with gravitas, like Shawqi before him. But here the dignity of the epic hero is undermined by comedic elements like his obvious discomfort in the face of Sumaya's flirtatious advances, and by a penultimate scene in which, as he attempts to save his beloved Abla from the aggression of another male character, he falls and clumsily drops his sword, leaving Abla to pick it up and kill the rival herself.⁷

Such productions raise a series of intriguing questions. Does Arab blackface signify differently with the passage of time, for example from the film in 1961 to the revue in 1979, or across geographical and national borders, e.g. in Egypt vs. Kuwait? How does the Kuwaiti revue's purported crossing of racial and cultural boundaries, via makeup, costuming, accents and set, intersect with the production's transgression of the region's gender boundaries, where male actors dress as women and female characters enact traditionally masculine gestures, as when Abla brandishes the sword? To what degree can contemporary academic discourses about blackface and the performance of race in the American/Western entertainment industry be applied to a context like Kuwait's, and to what degree do they need to take into account Kuwait's own historic, socio-economic and demographic specificities?

Though it cannot provide definitive answers to those questions, this article makes three observations that may prove useful as scholarship on Shakespeare, race, and blackface performance in the region continues to develop. First, as the above examples suggest, when surveying the use of blackface in the region, it is productive to look at performances of *Antara Ibn Shaddad* in tandem with those of *Othello*. Antara is, in many ways, Arabic literature's iconic analogue to Shakespeare's Moor: each hero is a racialized outsider who must contend with pervasive prejudice; each falls in love with a young woman of social standing who returns his affection despite her father's aversion to the match; and each strives to demonstrate his nobility and strength of character through a combination of rhetorical art⁸ and martial prowess—a literary correspondence that at least one theatremaker from the Arabian Peninsula, Omani playwright Ahmad al-Izki, has productively explored in performance (Hennessey, "*Othello* in Oman"). Moreover, portrayals of Antara raise thorny questions about racial signifiers and colorism in the Arab world. The role has been repeatedly performed in dark blackface, despite the fact that Antara's half-Arab, half-Abyssinian parentage does not require it. And even

⁷ In the 1961 film, Antara teaches Abla to fight with a sword; she uses those skills twice to fight with her cowardly suitor 'Amara al-Ziyadi, but does not kill him or anyone else.

⁸ Complicating this picture is the fact that Antara was a historical figure and an esteemed poet, at least some of whose works have survived. See Khannous for an excellent introduction to Antara's reflections on race in his poetry.

when an actor of African heritage is cast in the role, as Kuwaiti actor Faisal Al-Ameeri was in the 2008 Ramadan television series *Antarah Bin Shaddad*,⁹ he may find himself playing next to blackfaced Arab actors (like Jordanian actress Nadia Odeh, in the role of Antara's mother Zabiba). Portrayals of Antara can thus be usefully juxtaposed with regional performances of *Othello*, for which data points are currently scarce.

Second, where one might expect that international debates about the origins and the consequences of blackface would lead to an increased regional awareness of the problematic nature of the practice, the use of Arab blackface seems over time to have become even more crude, more insensitive, and more pointedly intended to make one subset of audience members laugh by portraying another subset in demeaning ways, several recent instances of which are detailed in the next section. And sadly, this observation seems to be borne out whether we look at Kuwait in particular, or the Arabian Peninsula more broadly, or across the Arab world.

Third, the contemporary university classroom on the Arabian Peninsula provides a productive space for long-overdue discussions of the use of blackface and the region's problems of racism and racial discrimination. Moroccan historian Chowki El Hamel describes "the refusal to engage in discussions on slavery and racial attitudes" as tantamount to a pervasive "culture of silence,"¹⁰ and although some critics and writers from within the Arab world have responded to regional instances of blackface with scrutiny and condemnation (e.g. Al-Khamri; "Blackface: The Ugliness of Racism"; Nashed), many actors and audience members continue to justify the practice as a harmless comedic trope. Raising these issues within the context of classroom discussion—through, for example, consideration of works like *Othello*—is one way to encourage the region's young people to break the "culture of silence" on racial discrimination.

Racism-as-Comedy in Arab Entertainment: Just How Bad Is It?

Abdullahi Hassan's Twitter compilation of instances of Arab blackface and racist jokes and language—primarily from Egyptian, Kuwaiti, and Lebanese television and cinema—provides an eye-opening survey of the pervasive nature of these phenomena (@Abz Captures). A few of his examples date back to the 1990s, but most are more recent. And even if we confine our attention only to

⁹ Directed by Rami Hanna and produced by Al-Maha Production; episodes are available via WatanFlix at <https://watanflix.com/en/series/%D8%B9%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D9%86-%D8%B4%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AF>.

¹⁰ El Hamel's scholarship focuses on Mediterranean North Africa, but the "culture of silence" is an apt description for the Arabian Peninsula as well.

2018 and 2019, we still find a startling range of incidences of Arab entertainers using black- or brownface.

In Kuwait in 2018, for example, the Ramadan comedy series *Block Ghashmara* sparked controversy for an episode where comedians donned blackface for a skit impersonating Sudanese men, playing on stereotypes of Africans as lazy and indolent, and travestyng Sudanese Arabic. The skit caused such an outcry that Kuwaiti actor Hassan al-Ballam delivered an apology over Twitter, promising never to play a role of this type again,¹¹ while his co-star on the series, Kuwaiti actor Dawood Hussain, apologized via YouTube. (Hussain, it should be noted, previously wore blackface and a wig to parody a well-known Sudanese song, backed up by a similarly made-up, trumpet-carrying minstrel-esque chorus, in a video that has racked up 2.4 million views on YouTube over the past decade.¹²)

In May 2019 Egyptian comedian Shaima Saif wore blackface in an episode of the television series *Shaqlabāz*: in a hidden-camera skit, she boarded a bus where she harassed other passengers in a Sudanese accent, flirted with a male passenger and pretended to drink alcohol and to steal other passenger's cell phones.¹³ A backlash ensued, including a Twitter campaign calling for a boycott of MBC Masr, the television channel that had aired the show. Saif apologized over Twitter, but claimed to just be playing a comedic role with no intention of offending anyone, implying that the criticism was overblown.

In an even more crudely racist skit on the Libyan TV show *Hidden Camera with Munira*, a clip of which was posted to YouTube in May 2019, a blackfaced actress leaves a baby stroller behind as she exits an elevator, the doors of which then jam. The targets of the prank, the people "trapped" in the elevator, check on the "babies," only to discover that the stroller contains a pair

¹¹ For coverage of the *Block Ghashmara* controversy, see for example Abuelgasim and Batrawy; Saeed and Peristianis; and Walsh.

¹² Dawood's apology can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qJKmoguPGKY>, while the parody video is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QagZEz3WjXI&feature=youtu.be>. For purposes of comparison, a Sudanese YouTube video of the same song, *Saraqū mūbaylī* ["They Stole My Mobile Phone"], which I believe is the original artists' recording, is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItujyRs6zWs&feature=youtu.be>. It has only two hundred thousand views, where the Kuwaiti parody has more than ten times that number. Once again, my gratitude to Hasan Hajiyah for bringing the latter two videos to my attention.

¹³ For coverage of this controversy, see for example Khalaf; Magdy; Marquis; and "Egypt Blackface Sketch." A partial compilation of clips from Saif's sketch can be seen on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bq8o9SjWaTU&feature=youtu.be>. The compilation concludes with the big reveal that the unsuspecting passengers have been filmed for the television show, upon which everyone laughs, thereby implying that Saif's actions were all just harmless fun.

of monkeys (Walsh). Arabic-language comments on the YouTube video repeatedly ask why the actress has chosen to demean Sudanese women by portraying one in this way.¹⁴

Why, one might ask, are the Sudanese the butt of all of these jokes? On one hand, Sudan's¹⁵ proximity to Egypt, the legacy of the enslavement of Sudanese and other Africans in Egypt through the 19th century (Powell), and the fact that the Sudanese community in Egypt numbers over four million have all made it a recurring target of Egyptian humor, which as noted above often serves as a model for entertainers elsewhere in the region. Etymology also comes into play: the name "Sudan" derives from the Arabic *bilād al-Sūdān*, literally "the country of black people," and thus the geographical designation serves reductively in some Arabic discourse as a metonym for black African peoples and cultures. And Kuwait's relationship to Sudan adds a further layer of complication, stemming from the significant role that Sudanese teachers, engineers, and medical professionals played during the rapid development of the Gulf states in the 1960s and 70s, and the summary deportation of Sudanese residents from Kuwait after the First Gulf War, in reprisal for Omar al-Bashir's failure to condemn the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Moreover, in March of 2018, a rumor surfaced that Kuwait had asked North Sudan to grant citizenship to the *bidoun jinsiyya*, ["those without a nationality"], a segment of Kuwait's population that claims, but has not been granted, Kuwaiti citizenship—a seemingly intractable issue that dates back to the establishment of Kuwait as an independent nation in 1961, and a problem which, the rumor implied, North Sudan could step in to resolve (AlJazeera, "Are Sudanese Passports"; Kennedy; Koningsor).

A local analogue to what Eric Lott describes as "the dialectical flickering of racial insult and racial envy" (18) may thus be at play in the *Block Ghashmara* sketch, given the long-standing significance of Sudan and the Sudanese in Kuwait. And this dialectical flickering seems even more obvious in the Egyptian and Libyan examples. In neither of those two countries did the Arab Spring of 2011 achieve the democratic transformation that protesters had hoped for, while in 2011 South Sudan achieved independence, and in 2019 a democratic revolution toppled North Sudan's dictatorial regime. It is no coincidence, in my view, that these two particularly crude instances of Arab blackface both occurred in May 2019, a month after the deposition of al-Bashir

¹⁴ Video of this skit, which aired on the Libya al-Ahrar channel, is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-aYoFT_Gzw&t=240s.

¹⁵ In this article, "Sudan" refers to the country as it existed before 2011. In other texts, the terms "Sudan" or "the Sudan" continue to designate the northern part of the country, from which South Sudan seceded in 2011, but for clarity's sake, I use "North Sudan" and "South Sudan" to refer to these two countries post-2011.

on 11 April. Given that one of the most iconic images from North Sudan's revolution was a photo that went viral in early April 2019, depicting a female protester named Alaa Saleh in a position of leadership and authority (Jenkins; Malik), the comedians' decision to don the dismissive patina of blackface to mock Sudanese women, in particular, smacks of both insult and envy.

But Arab blackface extends beyond caricatures of a single nation or people. On the Kuwaiti stage, blackface was employed in the reductive portrayal of black African characters in the hit 2017 comedy *Junūb Afrīqiya* ("South Africa")¹⁶—in which a group of Kuwaitis book a safari vacation at a resort, only to discover, to their dismay, that the resort is haunted, having been built on the ancestral lands of a spear-wielding, animal-hide-sporting African tribe who still lay claim to it. Kuwaiti performers have also invoked the facile association of blackness with petty criminality and Rastafarian culture, in plays like 2019's *Al-Da'ira Al-Sādīsa* ["District Six"], in which the incarcerated protagonist wore a braided wig and a Jamaican hat as well as skin-darkening makeup,¹⁷ and repeatedly pretended to take hits from a joint (recreational drug use is illegal, and potentially subject to severe penalties, in Kuwait). In short, Kuwait is a context in which serious discussion of the history and the implications of blackface is long overdue.

The Complexities of Race in Kuwait and the Gulf

Kuwaiti citizens, and citizens of the Arabian Gulf countries in general, are quite diverse in terms of physical appearance: while many have stereotypically Arab features, many others look African, Asian, or white. Various forms of racism, colorism, and racialized discrimination run rampant in the Gulf; African features, in particular, are a reminder of the region's long-standing trading links with East Africa, but also, more specifically, of the legacy of the African slave trade, which was not just legal in the Gulf but a significant component of the economy through the first half of the 20th century.¹⁸

¹⁶ Full video available at <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x70u6kg>.

¹⁷ An image from the play is available at <https://atitheatre.ae/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%B3%D8%A9-%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%84-%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84/>.

¹⁸ Transnational slavery remained legal in the Arabian Gulf countries until the 1960s and 70s—and, as attested by numerous reports and exposés, forms of modern-day slavery continue to exist throughout the Gulf (Badger and Cafiero; Begum, etc.). For more on the slave trade in the Gulf in the first half of the 20th century, see for example Zdanowski.

Residents of the Gulf are, by and large, wary of discussing the topics of race and racism, as socio-political criticism of any kind can be easily (and/or deliberately) misconstrued as an attack on national identity or social mores, or more dangerously, as an insult to the government or the ruling family. Yet scratch the surface and anecdotes abound, of Gulf citizens who look African being referred to as *'abd* [pl. *'abīd*], the Arabic for “slave” (a regional analogue to the n-word¹⁹); or of citizens who do not have stereotypically Arab features being treated as foreigners (see, for example, Nabbout 2018 and 2019).²⁰

Furthermore, while the above instances provide examples of citizen-on-citizen discrimination, the primary division within Kuwaiti society, as Anh Nga Longva argued in her classic study *Walls Built on Sand: Migration, Exclusion, and Society in Kuwait*, is that between nationals and non-nationals. Like Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait is a nation of unusual demographics, in that non-citizen residents outnumber citizens. According to recent estimates, only 30.4% of the population is Kuwaiti, while nearly 70% of the population is composed of non-citizens. Asian residents alone make up an estimated 40.3% of the population—more than Kuwaitis themselves—while non-Kuwaiti Arabs live in Kuwait in almost equal numbers to Kuwaitis (27.4% of the overall population). Africans and “Other” expats (including Europeans, North and South Americans, and Australians) each make up only about 1% of the total (Index Mundi).

As an “extreme rentier” state (Herb 2), Kuwait provides its citizens with lifelong welfare benefits, including free health care and education through the university level, heavily subsidized housing and utilities, and white collar public sector employment.²¹ Non-citizens, conversely, do not have access to any of these; many are euphemistically termed “guest workers,” performing low-skilled labor at the behest of employers who exercise an enormous amount of power over their living and working conditions and the duration of their stay, while other expats carry out higher-skilled labor in the private sector. Long-term foreign residents must send their children to private schools, as public schools

¹⁹ The Arabic word *zanjī*, sometimes transliterated *zinjī* (pl. *zanj* or *zinj*)—historically a designation Muslim geographers used as a catch-all term for the peoples and territories of much of southeast Africa—is similarly employed in contemporary Arabic as a pejorative for blacks and Africans.

²⁰ One recent, thoughtful literary exploration of this phenomenon—though about a citizen who looks Asian rather than African—is Kuwaiti novelist Saud Al-Sanousi’s prizewinning novel *The Bamboo Stalk*, the narrator of which is a young man with a Kuwaiti father and a Filipina mother. Though he has Kuwaiti citizenship, the narrator looks, as he puts it, “like a Filipino... a face that brought shame” (241, 244).

²¹ For more on rentierism in the Gulf, see for example “Politics of Rentier States” and “Kuwait Study Group.”

are restricted to those with Kuwaiti citizenship.²² As a 2013 Chatham House report notes,

The segmented labor market system and the mass importation of low-paid migrant workers benefits nationals economically, and helps to create a sense that they are privileged... (“Kuwait Study Group” 2).

Within the non-citizen population, race is often a marker of status: whites and non-Kuwaiti Arabs predominate in white-collar private sector positions, while low-skilled manual and domestic labor and work in the service industry are carried out primarily by the Asian population. And these demographic and economic disparities have given rise to a climate where racism and xenophobic rhetoric are on the increase.²³ One member of the Kuwaiti National Assembly, Safa’ al-Hashem, has deployed particularly virulent rhetoric against the non-citizen community, castigating migrants for overcrowding Kuwaiti hospitals (Associated Press), calling for them to be taxed “even on the air they breathe,” and describing the presence of non-Kuwaiti Arabs in the workforce as tantamount to “an invasion” (“Kuwait MP”)—a disconcerting metaphor, given that Kuwait suffered an actual military invasion in 1990, within living memory.

Moreover, in addition to the fraught issue of the *bidoun jinsiyya* mentioned above, a further race- (and gender-) based issue has recently come to the fore, raised by the activists of Kuwait’s “Gray Area Team”: by law, Kuwaiti fathers pass their citizenship to their children, but Kuwaiti mothers do not. Thus the children of Kuwaiti women and non-Kuwaiti men may be ineligible for Kuwait’s social welfare benefits, and vulnerable to other forms of discrimination (“Half-Kuwait”).²⁴

In sum, there is a spectrum of ways in which racialized discrimination can manifest itself within Kuwaiti society, and these forms of discrimination

²² Kuwaiti scholar Rania Al-Nakib has documented the ways that school district divisions in Kuwait mirror and reinforce divisions between various ethnic and sectarian groups within Kuwaiti society. For a contrarian argument that the standard academic analysis of Gulf societies which posits them as exceptionally exclusionary towards non-citizens has been reified and overblown, see Vora and Koch.

²³ For the pervasiveness and causes of xenophobia in the GCC, see Al-Kubaisi and Soliman. Ray Jureidini has also explored the links between the presence of migrant workers and xenophobia in the region (Jureidini), while Kristian Coates Ulrichsen and Andrew Gardner have each developed a body of nuanced scholarship on migrant labour in the Gulf.

²⁴ In a recent presentation at AUK, for example, one such half-Kuwaiti member of the Gray Area Team recounted that her recognition of her marginal status in Kuwait first occurred in her childhood, when a schoolmate threatened, “I’ll have you deported” (“Half-Kuwait”).

intersect with, and can reinforce or be reinforced by, other types of bias, like gender-based constructs or discrimination based on sectarian affiliation or social status. Add to this mix the fact that Kuwaitis, and Arabs who have grown up in Kuwait, are often acutely aware of the phenomena of anti-Arab and Islamophobic discrimination around the globe, and therefore may see themselves primarily as victims of racist stereotyping, rather than as perpetrators of it, and it becomes clear that *Othello* can be a particularly rich and thought-provoking text to read and perform in Kuwait.

‘Where is the Moor’ in Kuwait?

Egyptian scholar Ferial Ghazoul has argued that *Othello* is a play with particular resonance for the Arab world:

No work of Shakespeare’s touches chords of Arab sensibility and identity so much as the tragedy of *Othello*. For one thing, the hero is a Moor and therefore an “Arab.” Furthermore, he is not simply an Arab character in an Arab context; he is an Arab in Europe, necessarily evoking all the complex confrontations of Self/Other in a context of power struggle (1).

North African theatremakers have repeatedly invoked *Othello*, from Egyptian playwright Tawfiq al-Hakim’s short 1948 play *Al-Mukhrij* (“The Director”)—in which an actor playing the role comes to believe he is *Othello*, and kills the actor who plays Iago (Badawi 52)—to the high-profile 1964 performance of an Arabic translation of the play in Tunisia, by a “pan-Arab” cast, including Egyptian actor Gamil Ratib in the lead role.²⁵ Elsewhere on the Arabian Peninsula, despite scarce records of theatrical production, we find the play repeatedly staged and adapted by the pioneers of Yemeni theatre in the 1940s and 50s. In the late 1970s and 1980, Arabic-language theatre troupes in Qatar and Bahrain also staged high-profile productions of *Othello* (Hennessey, *Shakespeare* 48, 50-52, and 63-66).

But Kuwait provides scant records of *Othello* in performance. Arabic-language productions include a performance by an Algerian troupe in Kuwait in 2016, as part of the Eighth Festival of Arab Theatre (Jiradat), and a 2013 performance of a play called *Al-Mandīl* [“The Handkerchief”], based on the

²⁵ See “Arabic ‘Othello’”. It is unclear whether the actor played the role in blackface, though a description of Ratib in a 1956 French *Othello* as having “handsome and powerful features, though more Egyptian than Moorish” (Jacquot 120) may imply that he did not, at least not in that production. Also, for a comparative analysis of two Egyptian translations of *Othello*, see Hanna.

events of Shakespeare's play, by students at Kuwait's Higher Institute for Dramatic Arts (Abdullah).

Intriguingly, however, the play has proved of interest to expatriate communities in Kuwait. Indian expats, for example, recently performed two different versions of *Othello*, both in early 2018 and both in Malayalam (and neither in blackface). The first was playwright Hemant Kumar's Indian-set adaptation *Mazha* ["The Rain"], produced in February by the Kerala Arts and Nataka Academy and directed by Babu Chakola (Peter). The second was a translation performed in April, directed by Babuji Bathery and produced by the Kerala Arts and Literature Promoting Association of Kuwait at the Indian Central School, to an estimated audience of five thousand. One review noted both the spectacular nature of the latter production (including a grand entry by Othello and Cassio on horseback), and the fact that it had been executed by artists living "away from their homeland," amidst "the limitations of being in a foreign country," suggesting an analogy between the figure of Othello and the marginalized status of the Keralan community in Kuwait ("KALPAK").

Beyond that, my research to date has turned up only one other performance of *Othello* in Kuwait, and that only anecdotally: Bahraini actor, playwright, and television scriptwriter Qahtan al-Qahtani, who studied at the Higher Institute for Dramatic Arts in Kuwait, recently recounted that in the 1970s he and his cohort performed several of Shakespeare's plays, *Othello* included. Asked whether the title role had been performed in blackface, Al-Qahtani said no, but added that it was a very simple production, with little attention given to make-up, costumes, or the set (Al-Qahtani)—a response that suggested that blackface might have been employed, had the performance been more elaborate.

Othello does occasionally appear on university syllabi in Kuwait; professor Shahd alShammari, for instance, has written compellingly of her experiences teaching the play to students at the Arab Open University. And at least one student in Kuwait has made a deep dive into the text and a comparison of its various Arabic translations (Al-Fahal). But for a play purported to "touch chords of Arab sensibility and identity," *Othello*'s appearances in Kuwait are few and far between. Before the Fall of 2019, I had not even taught the play in Kuwait myself; my previous Shakespeare syllabus at the American University of Kuwait, from Fall 2017, had included *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Richard III*, and *The Tempest*, together with selections from the sonnets and other plays, but not *Othello*.

Othello and Shakespeare at AUK

One of the first questions that I wanted to answer was whether Ghazoul's assertion of a particular affinity between Arabs and the Moor would ring true among my students. AUK's student body is around 60% Kuwaiti and 35% non-Kuwaiti Arab, with a handful of students of American, Indian, and other backgrounds rounding out the numbers (the faculty, conversely, is primarily non-Kuwaiti Arab, Western, and Southeast Asian). So on the first day of the Fall 2019 semester, I presented my students with a list of Shakespeare's plays and asked which they would like to read in our class. *Hamlet* would be on our syllabus—that, I told them, was non-negotiable—and our reading would include plays from a range of genres, from comedy to tragedy to history. Beyond that, I was prepared to entertain their suggestions. The initial response was nonplussed (a number of students told me later that, up to that point in their university careers, no professor had allowed them input into the syllabus). An initially tentative but increasingly animated discussion followed, in which several students suggested that we read *Othello*, though not in overwhelming numbers; it just edged out *Macbeth* in terms of students' expressed interest. The discussion generated a reading list that included—in the order in which we read them—*Much Ado About Nothing*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.²⁶

The question of how Shakespeare and his characters rhetorically construct race arose quite early, in our discussion of the “Dark Lady” and the “Fair Youth” of the sonnets, where students, particularly those who had taken colonial and post-colonial literature courses, were attuned to the Elizabethan elision of whiteness, fairness, beauty and virtue, and to the rhetorical association of darkness of complexion with deception, ugliness, and malignity. Some were troubled by the ways in which this dichotomy also manifests itself in Arabic: in phrases like *qalbhu/qalbha abyad*, for example, literally meaning “his/her heart is white,” commonly used to praise someone for their kindness, generosity, or virtue. And before we even began reading *Othello*, one of my female students had expressed vibrant indignation at the racist implications of Claudio's line, “I'll hold my mind, were she an Ethiopie,” from *Much Ado About Nothing* (5.4.39).

Comparative reading of *Much Ado* and *Othello*, given the similarities (and divergences) of plot, theme, and character, will obviously bear fruit in

²⁶ My thanks to all of my students from ENGL 307: Shakespeare during the Fall 2019 semester at AUK, for their thoughtful and enthusiastic participation and for all that I learned from them throughout the semester. To maintain student privacy, the responses quoted here have been anonymised.

a classroom setting, hence their sequencing on the syllabus. But for our discussion of *Othello* I also had these goals in mind:

- to make the students aware of the fact that, for the majority of its history, the title role has been played by white actors in blackface;
- to help them gain a sense of how that history intersects with the phenomena of slavery, blackface minstrelsy, and systemic anti-black racism in the US;
- to familiarize them with the difficulties faced by pioneering black Shakespearean actors like Ira Aldridge in the 19th century and Paul Robeson in the 20th;
- to make them aware of just how recently the expectation persisted that *Othello* would be played by a celebrated white Shakespearean actor, blacked up or bronzed for the occasion.

I speculated that doing these things might encourage them to turn a more critical eye on blackface as a comedic trope in local and regional performance.

Before any of that, however, I wanted the students to read and respond to the play itself—so during our first week of discussion, I made no mention of blackface. But the issue of whether *Othello* is a racist play, or Shakespeare a racist writer, quickly arose. Some students were repelled by the graphic slurs Iago uses in the first scene; others countered that by associating such objectionable ideas and language with a malign and repugnant character like Iago, Shakespeare might be encouraging audience members to critique them. Some seemed quite keen to defend Shakespeare from the potential taint of proto-racist ideologies—in part, perhaps, because within their own context they receive contradictory messaging about the importance of constructive socio-political critique on one hand, and, on the other hand, about the threat that such criticism poses to national identity and patriotism. In short, our first two class discussions were somewhat ahistorical, involving close readings of the text and discussion of broad issues like racial and gendered power dynamics, truth and deception, and the nature of evil.

But by the second week, I wanted students to grapple with the play in more complex and historically grounded ways. We read texts like Edward Pechter's "*Othello* in Its Own Time" and Virginia Mason Vaughan's "'The Ethiopian Moor': Paul Robeson's *Othello*," and examined the long history of how the title role of the play has been cast. Collective discomfort grew, as the students discussed Vaughan's argument regarding the racialized language that underpins even the positive critiques of Robeson's performances, and as we looked at images of Orson Welles, Laurence Olivier, and Anthony Hopkins performing the role.

In the third week, I asked them to engage with a selection of texts about the history of blackface in the US, and about some of the region's recent blackface controversies. I also asked them to watch the YouTube video of

Ayanna Thompson's lecture "Shakespeare and Blackface, or Shakespeare and Unfreedom," delivered at the *Shakespeare and Social Justice* conference in Cape Town in May 2019. Students were intrigued by Thompson's discussion of, among other things, how she became "The Othello Whisperer"—the scholarly expert who would be called in to consult on productions of *Othello*, particularly when an actor of color was struggling to overcome negative feelings about the experience of performing the role—and by her insights into the "structural imbalance" within the play. As Thompson notes, Iago has a larger speaking role than Othello,²⁷ and Shakespeare allows Iago, in contrast to Othello, to deliver lines directly to the audience, creating a sense of shared understanding and complicity. Most problematically, insofar as Iago constantly explains his villainous plotting to the audience, the structure of the play places audience members in a position of intellectual superiority to Othello: since Iago reveals his plots to us, we understand that Othello is being duped, while he himself does not. In its very structure, then, the play creates a dynamic which activates racist stereotypes.

Thompson's lecture was one of several texts that I asked students to grapple with in preparation for a writing assignment which provided a choice of three questions; all three invoked the problem of what and how race signifies in *Othello*, and one specifically asked them to comment on the use of blackface in the Kuwaiti and/or regional entertainment industry. It was somewhat surprising, for me, to see the depth of emotion that these questions elicited, particularly in the typically self-censoring context of Kuwait. The following are two representative excerpts:

Orson Welles appeared in blackface while portraying Othello in the 1952 production and its irony screams at the audience. A white man playing a black character who is criticized for his skin color and in it, he begs the audience to understand or sympathize with what he's going through. It is extremely problematic in its way of trying to move the audience with its false compassion.

I have never seen any Arab show or movie portraying blackface. I thought it didn't exist in our region until I read the article by Declan Walsh called "Blackface, Staple of Arab Comedy, Faces Surge of Criticism." I was shocked and appalled when I read the article as it described certain scenes from shows and how some actors didn't see how it was wrong and offensive. One actress [Shaima Saif] even stated that "It's just comedy." She wouldn't have said that

²⁷ Iago speaks almost 9000 words to Othello's 6800. In fact, according to PlayShakespeare.com, Iago has one of the largest roles of any Shakespearean character, in terms of the overall percentage of the lines of the play that he speaks: 31% to Othello's less than 22%.

if instead of blackface, someone portrayed her race in a stereotypical way, but since it isn't about her, she thinks it is okay.

One student tried to justify certain uses of blackface within Arab theatre:

...Minstrel shows are racist because their characters are made to mock black people whereas in some cases [in Kuwaiti and Arab theatre] blackface is just used to match the features of the characters being played.

Others critiqued the local tradition much more harshly, as in the following three examples:

Just like the Minstrel shows, Kuwait has had a history of portraying dark-skinned people as caricatures, and treating them as unintelligent poor people.

The way Sudanese people felt about a Kuwaiti man [Hassan Al-Ballam] playing a caricature of them helped me realize how black people might feel when they saw white people portray characters like Othello on stage. The same way Alballam exaggerated his mannerisms, speech, and looks to depict Sudanese people, white actors playing Othello exaggerated their mannerisms to depict a black man.

[Referencing Saudi actor Nasser Al-Qassabi's portrayal of a Sudanese man in an episode of the popular television series *Tash Ma Tash*]: *The act seems very offensive because of his way of copying Sudanese by making himself seem ridiculous and stupid at the same time. It was supposed to be a funny scene, but it wasn't even fun to watch.*

The last student quoted above concluded her paper with a lament: *The blackface issue is really a frustrating and horrible thing to talk and write about.* That comment, I think, sums up the feelings of many in the class at being tasked with commenting on the fraught issue of racism, particularly in Kuwait and particularly by beloved actors in the regional entertainment industry.

It was as necessary as it was uncomfortable, however, since blackface continues to provoke controversy in Kuwait. In early January 2020, for example, Kuwaiti Instagrammer Ghadeer Sultan posted pictures and video of herself in blackface, claiming that her aim was to celebrate diverse forms of beauty and to demonstrate her virtuosity as a make-up artist (AlJazeera, "Kuwaiti Makeup Artist"). By that point, at the very least, my students had a more nuanced conceptual framework for understanding why Sultan's actions were problematic, whatever her intentions may have been. And I believe a further insight came out of our discussions: if *Othello* as a play can be structurally racist—even if Shakespeare himself didn't intend it to be so—then arguably, a society can also

be structurally racist, without that outcome being deliberately intended by any member of the government or any of the nation's citizens. That is, societies can be structured so that certain groups of people only interact, or most often interact, under circumstances that activate or reinforce negative stereotypes. And this idea, in the Kuwaiti context, generates a much more interesting nexus of questions and ideas than the reductive, defensive ones that come to the fore if a professor, particularly a non-Kuwaiti professor, asks a bald question like "Are Kuwaitis racist?"

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