

## *Introduction*

### *Negotiating Whiteness*

This is why to stay alive, forget thriving, I need to negotiate whiteness.

– Claudia Rankine, *Help*<sup>1</sup>

Whiteness emerges as a way of seeing and knowing the world that masquerades as universality and remains largely unnamed and unrecognized.

– Veronica T. Watson, *The Souls of White Folk*<sup>2</sup>

If I could resurrect William Shakespeare from the dead and ask him a question that I am dying to pose, it would be this: “How does it feel to be a problem?”<sup>3</sup> If I could be certain that he would not become defensive; that Shakespeare would not irrationally accuse me of “reverse racism,” of being racist toward white people, for respectfully naming and recognizing his whiteness; that he would not remain silent but would actually answer my burning question,<sup>4</sup> then I would ask more pointedly, “How does it feel to be a white problem?”<sup>5</sup> In the context of race, “white” changes everything. Here, in fact, “white” refocuses a question W. E. B. Du Bois considered in relationship to Blackness in his early twentieth-century treatise *The Souls of Black Folk*. For me, if it is clear that Blackness, understood more generally as one’s race, is a problem, then of course whiteness, too, is a problem. Yet, white people “do not live with constant reminders that [they] are seen as problems due to [their] race.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, white people do not actively or regularly consider the abovementioned inquiries because the idea of being problematic is estranged from their collective racial consciousness. For white people, the problem is always the somatically different Other.<sup>7</sup> That is to say, *I* am the problem. To that I say, “What about *you*?”<sup>8</sup>

I wrote this book to reflect on the “white problem” question, so that we continue integrating critical whiteness studies into early modern studies and Shakespearean discourse as people engage the playwright’s work in different ways: critically, pedagogically, and theatrically, for instance.<sup>9</sup>

Long-term, this book is meant to serve as a reminder that racial whiteness – Shakespeare's, the Macbeths', Tamora's, Hamlet's, Antony's, Iago's – is a problem.<sup>10</sup> To achieve these goals, I use Shakespeare's dramatic literature to position him as a theorist of whiteness who illustrated and critiqued *intra*-racial, or white-on-white, conflict.<sup>11</sup> In Shakespeare studies and premodern critical race studies, there exists an unarticulated and therefore understudied problem that I refer to as the "intra-racial color-line," another key theoretical intervention of *Shakespeare's White Others*.

Building on Du Bois' *interracial* "color-line" theory,<sup>12</sup> the intra-racial color-line delineates distinctions among early modern English white people that rely on the devaluing of somatically similar white folks: the white others, who violate the dominant culture's norms. Through its engagement with, and as a contribution to, early modern literary criticism, *Shakespeare's White Others* reminds readers that persistent anti-Blackness, often revealed through intra-racial violations of whiteness, is a constant problem. This problem substantiates the need for antiracist intervention by exposing through the white other the dark side of whiteness. "It is no longer sufficient to be not racist, as we have come to understand, but we must be actively and declaratively antiracist," according to Smith.<sup>13</sup> Scholarship, too, must be active and declarative in its antiracism. Among other things, *Shakespeare's White Others* asks readers to consider how race is crafted through racism, a process Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields term "racecraft" because, similar to witchcraft, it is "imagined, acted upon, and re-imagined."<sup>14</sup> Importantly, they add that "racecraft is not a euphemistic substitute for *racism*. It is a kind of fingerprint evidence that *racism* has been on the scene."<sup>15</sup> It is up to us to do the detective work with respect to Shakespearean drama and examine the residue of racism left behind by white others, for it is within whiteness where one can see the unrelenting workings of racecraft.

*Shakespeare's White Others* builds on the intellectual insights of scholars who have contributed work to premodern critical race studies, whiteness studies, Black studies, Black feminism, sociology, and social psychology in particular. Regarding the white other concept, this study builds on ideas articulated by Morrison in *The Origin of Others*, by Arthur L. Little, Jr. in *Shakespeare Jungle Fever*, and by Lauren S. Cardon in *The "White Other" in American Intermarriage Stories, 1945–2008*<sup>16</sup> in order to expand the understanding of racial "borders of power."<sup>17</sup> Moreover, as citations throughout the book demonstrate, several scholars within early modern English studies have influenced my thinking about race and whiteness.

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Specifically, I argue that Shakespeare strategically othered white figures in his dramatic oeuvre to condition dominant English attitudes toward white people, white others, and non-white people, namely Black people.<sup>18</sup> The playtexts position whiteness as a marked racial category that is heterogenous and unstable. The overt investment in intraracial division and related racialized conflict, even among culturally or ethnically similar white people such as the characters in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, reflects early modern preoccupations with “ideal’ and ‘less-than’” ideal intraracial conduct.<sup>19</sup> Shakespeare’s dramatic literature functioned, then, as a textual and theatrical channel that facilitated processes of white identity formation and manufactured the illusion of white racial solidarity.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, those processes worked to encode racialized distinctions created by and validated among white people. These distinctions illuminate intraracial tensions. And they expose the ever-shifting boundaries that denote the white person’s or white other’s insider/outsider status.<sup>21</sup>

Spiritually, sexually, psychologically, emotionally, morally, and even sartorially, as I will show, Shakespeare’s plays mark and marginalize white people in ways that depend on a character’s internal rather than epidermal status. The abstract marking signals the failure to meet white hegemony’s expectations. In this sense, the white other reflects crises that develop among the plays’ white people. Unsurprisingly, these crises, centered on intraracial otherness, often exploit emblematic blackness and/or racialized Blackness to signify racially a person’s less-than-ideal status and to reify the perceived superiority of whiteness. My book invests in acknowledging the playwright’s unique past and continued influence on white identity formation. This book invests in the processes of inclusion and exclusion among white people that also have an impact on non-white figures like Othello, Cleopatra, and even me. I consider the white other to be a figure like Richard III, Tamora, or Macbeth who is not “white enough” or who registers as less-than-ideal. This figure is useful for highlighting what manifests in the “racial imaginary” as meaningful differences among white people, differences that work to<sup>22</sup> perpetuate anti-blackness and anti-Blackness; expose the façade of white racial cohesion and identity stability; and reaffirm white supremacy, a phrase I deploy in reference to the imagined superiority of whiteness.<sup>23</sup>

As historian Keith Wrightson asserts, “The most fundamental structural characteristic of English society was its high degree of stratification. The reality of inequality was displayed everywhere” with respect to wealth, rank, living standards, and social power.<sup>24</sup> Within England, and even

within England's broader relationships with other white Europeans, it was evident that "degrees of people" existed.<sup>25</sup> Between 1590 and 1610, the approximate time period when Shakespeare wrote most of his plays, for example, a range of historical incidents occurred that marked persistent tensions among white English people, and between the English and ethnically different white Europeans:<sup>26</sup> the Anglo-Spanish War (1585–1604); the Irish-English Nine Years' War (1593–1603); Robert Devereux, the second Earl of Essex's attempted rebellion against Queen Elizabeth I (7–8 January 1601);<sup>27</sup> James VI of Scotland's contentious merger of the English and Scottish crowns (24 March 1603); the attempted Gunpowder Plot (5 November 1605); and the Northamptonshire witch trials (22 July 1612). By acknowledging historical moments such as these, one can see how conflicts within whiteness, a racial category that has a "recognizable" two-thousand-year-old history according to historian Nell Irvin Painter, were being negotiated as the English dominant culture defined for its convenience acceptable and unacceptable racial behavior.<sup>28</sup> To the list of characteristics that were used to distinguish white people from one another I would add race, in the intraracial sense. Degrees of whiteness exist.

More than any other early modern dramatist, Shakespeare's white masculine authorial power permeates various facets of modern local and global society such as education, literature, and theater. And more than a symbol with unlimited cultural capital, Shakespeare, I argue, is a chief literary architect of how hegemonic whiteness was (re)produced and negotiated in early modern England. Thus, *Shakespeare's White Others* interrogates how his plays reflect and/or depend on the emerging, and continually developing, construction of whiteness; the embeddedness of racism in literary art, anti-Black racism in particular; and the centering of white-on-white, or intraracial, tensions that too commonly evade critique. *Shakespeare's White Others* reveals – through readings of five core plays, *Titus Andronicus*, *Hamlet*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Othello*, and *The Comedy of Errors* – how ideal behavior among white people was, and still can be, significantly influenced by Shakespeare's dramatic literature. The consequences of this reality cannot be overstated. In targeting less-than-ideal white behavior, the dominant culture deploys racist tropes of blackness that have real-life implications for present-day Black people, as I suggest throughout the book and as I stress in Chapter 4 and the Conclusion. Because of the implications for present-day Black people, this book offers a theoretical intervention that challenges the uncritical pedestalization of Shakespeare, his characters, and his plays.<sup>29</sup> This book also challenges the uncritical theatrical production of Shakespearean drama. I introduce

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my intraracial color-line theory through Shakespeare's work to articulate and hopefully alter the critical, pedagogical, and theatrical possibilities for deploying Shakespearean drama for antiracist purposes. Among other things, *Shakespeare's White Others* urges white people to understand how antiracist action is a responsibility wrapped up in their socio-political power.<sup>30</sup> One of the most influential ways white people wield power is through policing of all kinds, especially the policing of what it means to be white, white other,<sup>31</sup> and Black.

As I close this opening section of the Introduction, I want to turn to *Much Ado About Nothing*, a romantic comedy that is set in Messina and centers racially white figures and their experiences. Hidden within the centering of people who are "fair," a term used over a dozen times in the play, are representations of the Black/African woman; and these cameos expose the malleability of both the white identity and white superiority, in addition to the ever-present tensions within whiteness that often become apparent in relationship to blackness, as Kim F. Hall cogently outlines in *Things of Darkness* – a masterful early modern race study.<sup>32</sup> When Claudio publicly shames Hero, his wife-to-be, and wrongfully accuses her of being an "approved wanton" (4.1.43) who is "most foul, most fair," phrasing that recalls language spoken by Macbeth's Witches (4.1.103), he blackens and then blackballs her for her alleged offense. He initiates her figurative transition from pure, virtuous white woman to lusty, Black strumpet; in so doing, Hero becomes like Cleopatra – discussed in Chapter 5 – whom Antony labels a "foul Egyptian" (4.12.10). Claudio's description indicates he sees Hero's undeniably white skin and the external somatic similarity between them; yet he also claims to see her unverified lascivious deeds, which cause him to reject Hero because he presumes she is tainted inside, both in her moral character and precious chastity. If Claudio's discourse appears to contradict itself, that is because "skin color is significant but only a piece of the early modern racial story," as Little, Jr. argues.<sup>33</sup>

Hero's racialized transition, which marks the introduction of an invisible Black woman, is fully realized when her father Leonato accepts without proof the whore allegations and essentially disowns his daughter, noting:

Why, she, oh, she is fallen  
 Into a pit of ink, that the wide sea  
 Hath drops too few to wash her clean again  
 And salt too little which she may season give  
 To her foul-tainted flesh.

(4.1.139–143)

Resurfacing as the white other from the pit of ink her father figuratively pushes her into with his racist discourse, Hero, now unclean and being studied, is<sup>34</sup> covered in sin and fallen from the privilege of pedestalized whiteness, and physically covered head to toe in blackness (if one were to stage Leonato's language)<sup>35</sup> that now complements and captures the blackness of the character Claudio thinks he sees. To distance themselves from shame and the loss of their masculine holds on the white female body,<sup>36</sup> and to distance themselves from this manufactured image of the sexually unrestrained and monstrous Black woman,<sup>37</sup> these white men conceptualize<sup>38</sup> a Black woman whose allegedly foul body and soul reflect the play's anti-Black sentiments. For example, Leonato's language links Hero's blackened white skin to death and decomposition, matters I explore at length in Chapter 2. As such, he positions blackness, embodied by Hero, as undesirable and in need of salvation. Fully imagined as black, inside and out, racially white Hero disappears from Act 4 once she is thought to be a whore. She returns in the last scene as the possible African "Ethiop" Claudio notes he would marry right before his redeemed wife-to-be enters (5.4.38).<sup>39</sup> He safely makes the Ethiop remark with his masked misogynoir, for the play does not give us any reason to believe a real Black woman can appear out of nowhere, unless she emerges from a pit of ink. With her credibility and the value of her white womanhood restored, Hero is freed from blackness, from being blackballed by Claudio. She is therefore free to enter with him into the institution of marriage, into which the play does not allow the metaphorical Black woman to enter.

Racial matters present themselves as complicated and deep in this play that does not contain somatic Blackness; an actual Black person, or even the representation of a Black person, never appears onstage.<sup>40</sup> Instead, *Much Ado* utilizes somatic similarity to illustrate *diminished* whiteness and the characters' responses to their white identity crisis, responses that notably differ along gender and class lines. Like the other Shakespeare plays critiqued in this book, *Much Ado About Nothing* shows how ideal whiteness is constructed by exclusion. Through Hero's emblematic racial transformation, *Much Ado* suggests white people are willing to accept and disown other white people based on how they adhere to the tenets of ideal(ized) hegemonic whiteness. Furthermore, this comedy implies that not adhering to the tenets of whiteness – due to an association with blackness or due to the performance of behaviors that defy white propriety, for example – puts one at risk for being seen as or somehow becoming less white. In other words, there is what social psychologists would consider a white ingroup and a white outgroup;<sup>41</sup> and it is this latter group that

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defines what I refer to as the white other. Upon descending into blackness in *Much Ado*, Hero temporarily becomes viewed as something other than her pure racially and morally white self once beloved by white men – her father and Claudio in particular. I contend that she – a white woman – is racially othered despite no somatic difference between her and the other figures in the play. This kind of racial difference is possible because of anti-Black sentiments that produce the intraracial color-line, the unstable boundary between acceptable and unacceptable whiteness.

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*Shakespeare's White Others* aims to reveal how anti-Black racism, anti-Black violence, and general, harmful anti-Black sentiments were and are integral to white identity formation and white ideology construction. This is true even in the absence of somatic Blackness, as my book shows. With Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* in mind, *Shakespeare's White Others* works with and moves beyond the Du Boisian color-line – by relying on the intraracial color-line – because a predominant theoretical emphasis on just the Black/white binary, while incredibly useful, has its limits. For one, the Black/white binary does not always prompt people to apply antiracist theory and interrogate whiteness in ways that hold the mirror up exclusively for white people to see themselves. Consequently, I establish the intraracial color-line as a theoretical tool that allows a principal critique of and focus on whiteness by way of the white other, a racially white figure like Hero who is blackened, and presented as less-than-ideal, for a variety of reasons I introduced in the Preface and will expand on throughout the book.<sup>42</sup> In short, the white other does not allow white people to escape racial examination of themselves, for the intraracial color-line is relevant to all white folk, as the my analysis of *Much Ado* in the previous section indicates.

Regarding the British preoccupation with perpetuating anti-Blackness, which historian Peter Fryer writes about in *Black People in the British Empire: An Introduction* and which the world saw in prevalent twenty-first-century responses to Meghan Markle's Blackness (Duchess of Sussex and wife of Prince Harry),<sup>43</sup> *The Souls of Black Folk* emerges as a powerfully rewritten history. It is one where Du Bois asserts his agency to rebuff the historical rejection of Blackness by situating himself next to Shakespeare as author, as thinker, as artist, as human. Beyond his direct allusion to *Macbeth*,<sup>44</sup> an allusion that incorporates Shakespeare's white authorial and authoritative voice into the text, Du Bois' poetic statement, "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not," invites his audience to *see* Black and

white together. He invites his audience to (re)imagine their co-existing transhistorically and transnationally. He imagines them existing with accord in the face of pervasive anti-Black sentiments expressed in his time, Shakespeare's time, and our own time. Yet, there is something else happening with Du Bois' language relating to his use of iambic pentameter, which I write about in "(Early) Modern Literature: Crossing the Color-Line."<sup>45</sup> The poetic quality intentionally adds rhythm to his bold claim that draws the premodern into his present to further reject ideas about Black inferiority.<sup>46</sup> As the author of *Souls*, Du Bois wields the power to prevent symbolically white-on-Black policing as he crosses the color-line and negotiates whiteness.

Yet, across the *intra-racial* color-line, in a gray area where whiteness polices whiteness and negotiates with itself, a race war rages on. The white self – the social, cultural, physical, and psychological white self that is an amalgamation of conveniently shifting ideologies of superiority – is constantly engaged in battle. The mounting casualties are innumerable. The conflict I refer to is not about the centuries-old physical and rhetorical clashes<sup>47</sup> racially white people have had with various "strange" religious and racial Others such as Muslims, Jews, Asians, Native Americans, Africans, and Black people as a result of discrimination, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia.<sup>48</sup> Rather, the white self is literally and symbolically at war with an "ontologically insecure"<sup>49</sup> version of its own self that is preoccupied with preservation<sup>50</sup> because of perceived threats to the white existence.<sup>51</sup> The white self paradoxically needs but cannot stand the ontologically insecure version of itself, which it must constantly acknowledge only to dismiss, discourage, disappoint, disparage, and attempt to destroy. All of this points toward the instability of whiteness, which depends on the white other's presence. And this instability is reflected historically in certain people's acceptance into whiteness over time, that is, Jewish and Irish<sup>52</sup> people, and in specific intra-racial conflicts, such as those that I listed in the first part of this Introduction.

The cyclical sadomasochistic dynamic between the white self and the white other is apparent in the world at present, too. This white-on-white dynamic was apparent in the world as it *was* centuries ago in the early modern period, visible in Shakespearean drama and Elizabethan and Jacobean culture, although sometimes obscured by the disruptive presence of somatically different Others, like the Black characters in Shakespeare's more commonly recognized race plays: *Titus Andronicus*, *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Tempest*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*.<sup>53</sup> For some



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time, then, the white self has battled with a version of itself that has tried to remain hidden in plain sight. In different ways, the intraracial color-line reveals how such anti-Blackness, whether physical, rhetorical, emotional, metaphorical, or psychological, functions as a multifaceted white supremacist tool. This tool simultaneously and paradoxically shapes and harms white identity and white people's "self-concepts"<sup>54</sup> while undoubtedly harming racial Others, particularly Black people. The intraracial color-line explicitly illustrates racial whiteness as an ideology and intentionally unstable identity category that depends parasitically on violence and imbalanced power relations of all kinds. It is an ideology that necessitates antiracist intervention.

By centering white-on-white relations, the intraracial color-line illuminates the prevalence of white-on-white violence in Shakespeare's plays, especially in tragedy, which I recognize as a white genre that depicts racial whiteness as tragic, as a catastrophic construct. Within this one dramatic genre, Shakespeare centers and sensationalizes intraracial conflicts from his first play, *Titus Andronicus* (circa 1590), to his last, *Timon of Athens* (circa 1608). *Shakespeare's White Others* leans on critiques of Shakespearean tragedy, with references here and there to comedy, romance, and the history plays, to suggest that genre and form can be useful for tracing the development of racial constructions and observing the white other's presence. It is my hope that future book-length studies will address genre more comprehensively in relationship to race. While this study is not invested in explicit analyses of the plays' formal and structural features,<sup>55</sup> this study's awareness of genre informs the Shakespearean textual analyses that engage antiracist theory, critical race studies, whiteness studies, Black feminism, social psychology, and sound studies. Finally, in being a genre that scholar Patricia Parker associates with blackness, when observing that "black was the color of tragedy and revenge tragedy in particular":<sup>56</sup> Tragedy is a prime dramatic site for examining whiteness and the white other because it is consumed by representations of blackness. As I note, tragedy is also preoccupied with centering white people.<sup>57</sup> Given the very few cameos of Black characters in Shakespeare's canon, and certainly within his tragedies, which contain only Aaron, Othello, and Cleopatra amid dozens upon dozens of racially white characters, tragedy functions as a useful site for investigating and thinking about whiteness, which has been treated in so many ways – racially, aesthetically, historically, culturally, socio-politically, religiously, and metaphorically, for instance – as Blackness's binary opposite.

### “It [Does] Matter if You’re Black or White” ... or White Other<sup>58</sup>

What does it mean to be Black, white, or white other?<sup>59</sup> And why does it matter? In 1991, the late global pop superstar Michael Jackson asserted in the chorus to his wildly popular song “Black or White” that it doesn’t matter if someone is Black or white.<sup>60</sup> With Black and white being the extreme ends of the racial hierarchy, the added implication, as suggested by the song’s music video visuals, was that the racial backgrounds of everyone in between Black and white do not matter either. Jackson’s idealistic song followed significant twentieth-century social, political, and cultural moments that exposed the pervasiveness of global white supremacy and/or responses to it: South African apartheid, the Harlem Renaissance, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the American Civil Rights Movement, the Black Arts Movement, and the Black Power Movement, to name a few. Moreover, Jackson’s song emerged around other significant socio-political moments such as the end of Nelson Mandela’s lengthy imprisonment, the infamous Rodney King beating and the 1992 LA Riots. Jackson’s racial equality anthem, which was created *because of* global and anti-Black racism, today sounds more like confirmation of a hopeful dream deferred, especially in light of the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin on my birthday, February 26, and the 2013 inception of the Black Lives Matter movement that continues to be relevant and necessary, and will be so indefinitely. Ironically, Jackson’s “Black or White” exists precisely because race matters. Everything in between Black and white matters.

Amplifying “colorblind” rather than antiracist or color-conscious ideals when the song’s featured rapper L.T.B. declares in his final verse, “I’m not going to spend my life being a color.” Jackson’s “Black or White,” which contains positive if sometimes naïve messages about race and racism, registers like a harmonious fantasy that elides the incredible authority of white patriarchal power and white supremacy (phenomena Jackson’s music video calls attention to throughout, though it is unclear if that is all deliberate).<sup>61</sup> On the heels of the song’s release, overt anti-Black racism and violence persisted. Such racism is arguably even more visible now in the post-postracial twenty-first-century, in part, because of how easily racist content moves across the internet and the globe.<sup>62</sup> If it was unclear or seemed irrelevant to some people in the late twentieth century when the world first heard “Black or White,” it is certainly apparent now that being white matters, as does being Black and all that lies between Black and white in the racial hierarchy. That it matters, and how it matters, is an integral premise of this book, which situates itself among a range of