

1 Introduction

In December 2019, the annual worldwide controversy regarding the Dutch character Black Pete (an extremely popular tradition among kids, in which white adults blacken their faces) broke out once again, attracting more critical attention than ever before. Various news outlets such as the *Guardian*, the *Independent*, the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Indian Express*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, BBC, CNN and Al Jazeera, to name a few, highlighted the ongoing debate on blackface traditions, and celebrities such as Kim Kardashian, Trey Songz and American rapper Waka Flocka Flame weighed in on the debate, speaking out against the tradition. In 2018, a Dutch *Othello* production by Daria Bukvić also entered this controversy and challenged Dutch blackface traditions and institutional racism in Dutch society. Interestingly, this was also the first main house production in the Netherlands wherein *Othello* was played by a black person. While the use of blackface in *Othello* has long been discredited in anglophone countries, this has not been the case in many other countries, although mainstream Shakespeare criticism conveys, at times, a somewhat unquestioning acceptance that blackface condemnation represents a global phenomenon. With Shakespeare performance studies being Anglo-centric, the scholarly community is often ignorant of case studies that examine the interaction of institutional racism, society, blackface traditions and history and how these interact with *Othello* productions. In this study, the author takes a different approach to blackface in *Othello* in a country which is, out of all EU countries, probably politically and culturally the closest to the UK and is also historically perceived as a tolerant country. As such, this Element analyses not only the Dutch tradition of blackface in *Othello*, but also how this responded to and even supported a possible paradox in society: the coexistence of institutional racism and xenophobia alongside the (self-)perception of a tolerant society and denial of racial discrimination.

1.1 *The Demise of Blackface in Othello*

An overwhelming majority of research on *Othello* and blackface is based on the situation in anglophone countries, with the UK and the USA being the most researched countries. The consensus is that up to the 1960s, mainly

white actors would play Othello in movie and theatre productions, while the use of blackface seemed to be standard practice in most instances. In general studies and sourcebooks on *Othello* or Shakespeare and race, there is an almost paradigmatic group of examples for this tradition used repeatedly in illustrating the performance history of theatre and movie productions of the play (e.g. Alexander & Wells, 2000; Hadfield, 2003; Hankey, 2005; Jarrett-Macauley, 2017; Kolin, 2002; Neill, 2006; Potter, 2002; Thompson, 2006, 2016; Vaughan, 1994; Vaughan & Cartwright, 1991). These works invariably include a group of early black actors, such as Ira Aldridge and Paul Robeson, who at the time were a minority in a predominantly white actor environment for the role. Likewise, post-war blackface performances by white actors such as Laurence Olivier and Orson Welles are also generally included in these studies. While in the UK, the reaction to Olivier's *Othello* in the mid-1960s was overall positive, the US reception expressed far more discomfort.

From the 1960s onwards, a gradual decline can be seen in the use of blackface, often explained by factors such as the increase in awareness about race, the civil rights movement, unwanted associations with minstrel shows and growing racial tensions in society. Although blackface continued into the 1980s in the UK, lighter make-up than before was being applied. The 1981 *Othello*, with Anthony Hopkins as Othello in the BBC Shakespeare Series, is often considered a turning point in the British tradition after an outcry over the casting decision and the refusal to address racial issues (Potter, 2002: 154–6). Both in the USA and in the UK, white actors retreated from the role, the use of blackface was increasingly discredited, and a consensus developed that only actors of colour could play the role thereon (Thompson, 2016: 83). Looking back on the *Othello* with Laurence Olivier, Rozett (1991: 265) mentioned how she wished that she had not shown the movie to her students and described Olivier's depiction of Othello as 'dated – one cannot imagine a white, prominent actor employing such exaggerated blackface makeup today'. While arguably true of the Shakespeare tradition in the UK and the USA, the remark also highlighted the discrepancy between these developments and those in many other countries at the time.

At the end of the twentieth century and during the twenty-first, tensions in the Middle East, the effects of 9/11 and the ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq also found their way into *Othello*. More military-oriented productions, a

focus on Othello's Arab roots, the relation to tensions with Muslims and the psychological effects of war on soldiers became increasingly important themes in productions of the play. Recent prominent examples include Nicholas Hytner's production in the National Theatre (2013), Ron Daniels' Shakespeare Theatre Company's *Othello* (2016) and Richard Twyman and Abdul Rahman-Malik's *Othello* in the Tobacco Factory (2017). While these productions presented Othello above all as a man rather than as a representative of a specific country or race, he was positioned as a Muslim and a military man. Although the racial topic became less central in these productions, the use of blackface or white actors without blackface for the title role in *Othello* had practically disappeared by this time, with some notable exceptions, in which case these choices were inevitably a prominent topic of debate in reviews and academic research. A constantly recurring example in performance research to illustrate this point was Jude Kelly's 1997 Shakespeare Theatre *Othello* with Patrick Stewart as Othello, surrounded by an almost entirely black cast (Hankey, 2005: 107–11; Iyengar, 2002: 118–24; Potter, 2002: 179–84).

The same year, the performance of young black actor David Harewood as Othello at the National Theatre led to a discussion in British media about the reluctance in casting white actors as Othello, which some considered reverse discrimination (Neill, 2006: 65; Wheatcroft, 1997). In the debate on race and casting in Othello, actor Hugh Quarshie and playwright Kwame Kwei-Armah raised the topic of whether black actors should consider if it is ethical at all to play Othello, arguing that it might risk reinforcing the racial stereotypes that pervade the play (Quarshie, 1999; Kwei-Armah, 2004). Further, almost two decades after David Harewood's performance, actor and director Steven Berkoff and Shakespeare scholar Stanley Wells urged the theatre industry to 'grow up' and allow white actors to play such roles (Berkoff, 2015; Wells, 2015). However, despite these discussions, white actors are still a rarity for this role and inevitably invite comments, while the use of blackface itself seems to be a thing of the past in *Othello* productions on the main anglophone stage. As blackface recently also started to disappear from the operatic *Otello*, with Latvian tenor Aleksandrs Antonenko abandoning the practice in the 2015 Metropolitan Opera production, reviewers reported that the change came more 'than a generation after leading theatre companies stopped "blackening up" white actors to play

Othello in Shakespeare's play' (Cooper, 2015). While this is true of the tradition in many anglophone countries, the perspective might have been less valid for other parts of the world.

1.2 Non-anglophone Othello

While much could be said about the dichotomy between anglophone and non-anglophone Shakespeare, it is a differentiation which is commonly made when comparing *Othello* productions around the world. Although most attention has focused on the USA and the UK, so-called global Shakespeare, also known by many other terms, has increased interest in and study of *Othello* in other countries. However, casting decisions and the use of blackface are in many countries still relatively unexplored. Kolin (2002: 53–8) pointed out how in non-Western countries the signifiers for race were different, how the importance of 'Otherness' gained a new meaning, and how the specific theatrical and political conditions influenced productions. Loomba (2008: 129–36) indicated how racial politics could be completely erased from the play in India or how *Othello* could also be used to address racism in India. Potter (2002: 174–9) argued that the involvement in the slave trade would have caused productions of *Othello* in the USA and the UK to be 'always more tinged with unease than those in the rest of the world', although also providing examples of how a Japanese, German and South African production of *Othello* responded in different ways to national racial discourses. Likewise, Thompson (2016: 97–102) included a South African, a German and a Singaporean *Othello* in her production overview of the play, and Hankey (2005: 93–7) included a production from South Africa. The 1990 South African *Othello* by Janet Suzman, directed at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, has by now turned into another example which has entered the 'performance canon' and is unfailingly discussed in overviews. Apart from its content, her use of the English language, the entanglement of British and South African history, the close relation with the British theatre world and its ready accessibility might have added to its prominence.

While the anglophone and semi-anglophone productions referred to in the research on *Othello*, race, blackface and casting tend to employ a rather

standard and almost paradigmatic set of productions, non-anglophone examples demonstrate a wider variety, although there has been a tendency to focus on non-Western countries in Asia and Africa in research, also due to their supposedly larger difference with the USA and the UK for their role in the slave trade and the ensuing racial discourse and demographic composition (Kolin, 2002; Potter, 2002). In the non-anglophone, Western context of *Othello*, race and blackface, a limited number of German productions received a lot of attention in literature. These were mainly the more controversial productions, such as Peter Zadek's 1976 *Othello*, which caricatured and deconstructed racial stereotypes (Hankey, 2005: 85; Kennedy, 1996: 269–70), or the 2006 *Othello* by Luk Perceval, who combined the racial agenda with the casting of a white Othello (Billing, 2007). Other controversial German productions that used a white Othello were Jette Steckel's Deutsches Theater Berlin *Othello* (2009), which challenged racial and gender stereotypes and featured an Othello played by a white, female actress dressed in a gorilla costume, and the 2011 *Othello* by Thomas Ostermeier, whose choice of a white Othello was aimed at questioning the racist production history of the play (Boyle, 2012). Apart from the focus on controversial, mainly German productions, the topic of *Othello*, race and blackface in European countries remains limited. Some attention has been paid to Eastern European productions, where the argument is that they tended to take a more political or romanticised approach to the play, with blackface not being uncommon, in part due to a lack of black actors (Potter, 2002: 200–5). Incidentally, other countries have been highlighted, such as Norway, which employed a white Othello in a production with a military perspective to de-emphasise racial difference aspects and emphasise strain on all military personnel (Thompson, 2016: 83–4).

Generally, the focus on non-anglophone European *Othello*, blackface and casting has been scattered, brief and haphazard, with a focus on Germany, although in that case too only the provocative (at least from an anglophone point of view) productions using white actors were explored. A more detailed analysis of productions in the specific national or cultural context has been lacking, even though it is always argued to be of major importance. Likewise, the relationship between *Othello* productions and cultural blackface traditions in different countries has been an underexplored topic, even though the use of blackface in a variety of countries has continued as part of festivities

or cultural expression, despite any controversies. In Germany, for example, the use of blackface is still part of the cultural domain, as seen in the recent Carnival parades, while the tradition is still far stronger in the Netherlands. The interaction between these traditions and their wider cultural and historical context and productions of *Othello* needs further exploration in research that has leaned strongly on an anglophone approach.

This study aims to address some of these issues, moving beyond the anglophone limits, through an in-depth Dutch overview of *Othello* within the national and cultural discourse on race, blackface and theatre. The Netherlands has been chosen for a variety of reasons: like the UK, it participated in the slave trade; it has developed into a multicultural society in the past fifty years; it does not have a lack of black actors; it is closely related to the UK with English being the main foreign language taught in schools and Shakespeare the most performed playwright on stage. It is also a country known traditionally for its tolerant attitude. How then is it possible that white actors and blackface had such a strong presence in the Dutch staging of *Othello* and that there was so little response to the issues of race? Additionally, what can explain this gap between the Netherlands and the USA and the UK, and what effect did the first main house production employing a black actor in 2018 and its rerun in 2020 have on the debate on race and blackface? This Element explores these questions with a focus on the twenty-first century.

The 2018 *Othello* was a brutal and confrontational revelation on the Dutch stage, not only because it employed a black actor, but also because it challenged long-established blackface traditions on and off stage and wanted to address one of the often neglected open wounds on the body of Dutch society, institutional racism. Opposite the black Othello in this production, all the other actors were whitened up even further to highlight the extreme whiteness of the ruling elite. The stage directions which indicated physical abuse by Othello towards Desdemona were spoken by the other characters, but not acted out by Othello. It highlighted how preconceived notions by the white environment of black people's actions, irrespective of whether they had actually taken place, not only influenced but also took over the place of reality. In the end, Othello was strangled by Iago, revealing how exclusion, isolation and marginalisation ultimately led

to merciless racial violence. The production, which started out in smaller auditoriums, received raving reviews and had a rerun in 2020 in the big auditoriums throughout the country. Reviewers suddenly noted that ‘Othello is black and it matters’ (Janssens, 2018), as a representative newspaper headline read. At the same time, the production also got pushback from the Dutch theatre world for choosing racism as the core of the play. Also, while media reaction was positive, the same media continued to deride the very publications on institutional racism which were used as the building blocks for the production. The groundbreaking quality, reception and impact of this production, discussed in detail in Section 5, can be fully understood only in the light of a detailed analysis of the history of migration, multiculturalism and changing attitudes to race and blackface traditions in the Netherlands and of previous productions of *Othello* on the Dutch stage (mainstream and fringe), which follow in Sections 2 to 4.

After a discussion of the political, social and cultural context of blackface and racism in Section 2, the author analyses in Section 3 the tradition of white actors and blackface in *Othello* after World War II, with a focus on Dutch productions in the twenty-first century, including the 2003 Ivo van Hove *Othello*, which had a rerun in 2012. Next, in Section 4, the author analyses the four fringe productions that deviated from this tradition of white actors (with or without blackface) and how both their intent and impact on blackface and the racial discourse were minimal to ambiguous at best. In Section 5, the author analyses the 2018 production and its 2020 rerun, its reception, the implications of this production for future revivals in the Netherlands and, more generally, its impact on the debate about institutional racism and the ongoing controversy about traditions with problematic racist undertones, like Black Pete.

2 Context: Dutch Tolerance, Blackface and Racism

In order to understand the intricate relationship between *Othello*, blackface and race in any national context, be it the UK, the USA or any other country, it is necessary to provide an adequate analysis of the specific historical, political and cultural backgrounds. The Netherlands forms an integral part of the EU, being one of its founding fathers, and is often considered a bastion

of tolerance. However, a closer reading of the development of a multicultural Dutch society, blackface traditions and institutional racism may assist in clarifying the more hidden layers. An understanding of this is a *conditio sine qua non* to appreciate the development of the Dutch *Othello* and the discrepancy between the Netherlands and surrounding countries. Before analysing *Othello* productions in more detail, the author first discusses the context, paying specific attention to the Dutch tradition of tolerance, the changing demographic composition, the Dutch role in the slave trade, institutional racism and the blackface tradition of Black Pete.

2.1 A History of Tolerance and Immigration

Four years after Shakespeare was born, William I, Prince of Orange, invaded the Netherlands to drive the Spanish troops out of the country. It was the beginning of the Eighty Years' War, an uprising of seventeen regional states (roughly comprising the present-day Netherlands, Belgium and Luxemburg) against Philip II of Spain. Next to discontent with taxation and an aversion for Spanish absolutism, another major grievance was the religious persecution of Protestants. Dutch society is traditionally known for its tolerance of refugees and outsiders. The Union of Utrecht, a 1579 formal agreement of the northern, more Calvinist provinces in their war against Spain, laid the foundation for the current Netherlands. The agreement guaranteed, for example, that nobody could be persecuted on religious grounds – this amount of religious freedom was unique in Europe at the time (Blom, 1995: 82–92; Griffioen & Zeller, 2011: 165–6; Moore, 1997: 20–3; Poliakov, 1975: 38; Vital, 1999: 61, 145).

In the same year, several of the southern, more Catholic provinces broke away from the northern rebellion against Spain and united in the Union of Atrecht. The war against Spain and the occupation of major cities in these provinces, such as Ghent, Antwerp and Brussels, caused an exodus from the south to the northern city states of Zeeland and Holland. The violence, continuing persecution of Protestants in the Flemish provinces, ongoing pillaging, economic factors and the tolerant political and religious climate in the northern provinces led to many refugees seeking the shelter of the Dutch state. A city such as Antwerp lost, for example, more than half of its

inhabitants in this period, while immigrants made up more than half of the population in major Dutch cities such as Leiden, Haarlem and Middelburg. The impact on the young Dutch state was enormous: the economy got a major boost from the new immigrants, many of whom were craftsmen. Art and culture blossomed, and the Netherlands was on the verge of what came to be known as its golden age. After an initially warm welcome, a more negative perception of the immigrants set in. A few decades later, this seemed to have disappeared almost entirely and hardly any references to negative stereotyping against the Flemish could be found anymore (Dubbelman & Tanja, 1987; Lucassen & Penninx, 1999). A new wave of mass immigration caused by religious conflicts was seen at the end of the seventeenth century. In 1685, the Catholic French king Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes, which had offered the Huguenots certain civic and religious freedoms. This led to a renewed persecution of Protestant Huguenots, who sought asylum in surrounding Protestant countries, and more than 50,000 Huguenots migrated to the Netherlands. In this tradition of tolerance, many persecuted Jews also sought shelter in the Dutch state over the centuries, particularly Sephardic Jews from Portugal and Spain and Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern Europe. The strong waves of anti-Semitism that passed over Europe from the second half of the Middle Ages onwards never seemed to have gained a foothold in the Netherlands, and unlike countries such as Russia, Poland, Germany, Great Britain, France and Spain, the Netherlands did not have ghettos, pogroms, job prohibitions or mass expulsions (Blom, 1995: 166–72; Michman, Beem & Michman, 1992: 7–64; Van Anandel, 1983: 45–68; Van Arkel, 1984: 47–51).

Apart from refugees, the Netherlands has also known a long tradition of labour migration. From the seventeenth century onwards, tens of thousands of labourers travelled yearly to the Netherlands, usually for seasonal employment in agriculture. Another stream of immigration was made up of trading colonies of foreign merchants, who, contrary to seasonal labourers, generally settled on a more permanent basis in the Netherlands (Heijes, 2001). The first half of the twentieth century saw no large-scale migration to the Netherlands. An important exception was the migration of Belgians to the Netherlands during World War I, but they largely moved back to their home country after the war. Immediately after World War II, during the first few years of reconstruction, the Netherlands experienced a

strong surge in emigration to countries such as Canada and Australia. The emigration was strongly stimulated by the Dutch government, which considered the Netherlands overpopulated. At the time, the population was between nine and ten million. By 2019, the Dutch population had increased to more than seventeen million. While this post-war period saw the global perception of Dutch tolerance extended towards lenient attitudes on soft drugs, euthanasia, same-sex marriages and abortion, the fast growth and changing composition of the Dutch population revealed hidden layers underneath the seemingly tolerant Dutch, which partly found their way into *Othello*.

2.2 Recent Migration Patterns

The recent growth of the Dutch population leaned strongly on immigration, which gradually increased after the 1950s. Three new migration groups could be distinguished:

1. Immigrants from former colonies
2. Labour immigrants from the Mediterranean
3. Immigrants who sought political asylum

The former colonies of the Netherlands encompass Indonesia, Surinam and the Netherlands Antilles. Immigration from Indonesia started in 1945, after the capitulation of Japan, and lasted until 1960, partly due to an anti-Dutch mood in Indonesia. The perception at first was that the integration in Dutch society encountered few problems and that most of these immigrants had been warmly welcomed, although later the ‘myth of success’ was punctured and other stories emerged, emphasising the other side (Ellemers & Vaillant, 1985; Heijes, 2001; Schuhmacher, 1987). Large immigration waves from the former colony of Surinam took place around its independence in 1975 and around 1980, when visas became obligatory. Further deterioration of the Surinam economy, the infamous December murders of 1982 and the increasing sense of military involvement in the country led to the continuation of migration from Surinam to the Netherlands. In total, about a third of the Surinam population left for the Netherlands (Buddingh, 2017). Immigration from the other Dutch colony in the West, the Netherlands Antilles, increased