Introduction
Toward Racial Literacy

The Fact of Early Modern Race

Grappling with reading and misreading Shakespeare goes back as far as the publication of his collected works. Addressed "To the Great Variety of Readers," the Preface to Shakespeare's 1623 First Folio ties book sales to potential consumers' "diuers capacities," meaning the diversity or variety in reading skills or literacy.[1] The Folio's editors, John Heminge and Henry Condell, emphasized literacy as central to an effective marketing strategy, and Folio sales, they argued, relied on a literate, readership who would publicize the virtues of Shakespeare's collected works. Literacy as reading competence had a commercial value in popularizing the works and would, in hindsight, prove canonically consequential to the author's legacy. Today, however, a markedly different learned capacity – a *racial literacy* – is demanded of scholars and critics who, as modern readers and stewards of the maintenance and growth of the Shakespeare industry, are confronted with a racially different research scenario and perception of texts.

We now know that the early modern theater manifested a global awareness of blackness through the multiple African characters in works by several writers, including William Shakespeare, George Peele, George Chapman, Ben Jonson, John Webster, Thomas Middleton, and Richard Brome.[2] The textual encoding of blackness sets in relief the moment in early modern history when the presence of blackness, in the form and person of Africans, entered the lives of white Europeans – whether through trade, travel and exploration, immigration, and, perhaps most widely, through readings of various texts and the staged encounters of theatrical representation.[3] Transported enslaved Africans, black household servants, royal musicians, weavers, porters, mariners, and other laborers among the varied professions populate the historical and literary archives; imported goods and fashionable items rehearse the black presence in the residual cultural traces of their foreign affiliations.[4] Accounts of English national

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and political culture now reflect reconsiderations of religion, gender, language, civility, kinship, trade, commerce, and imperialism as deeply embedded categories and vectors of race.[5] Making visible this black corporal and textual presence, early modern race research has altered the demographic landscape of traditional scholarship over the last thirty years.[6]

This study posits, therefore, that the fact of blackness in Shakespeare's world and work is sufficient to claim his considerable investment in race is more far-reaching and complex than we have historically been prepared to acknowledge. The crucial question thus remains: How have scholars, as readers, adjusted to the evidence of Shakespeare's racial interests? Despite the explicit attention early modern theatrical texts and audiences paid to signs and sights of blackness,[7] Francesca T. Royster's observations from the late 1990s concerning early modern studies as an "'unraced' enterprise" remains true today, albeit in more nuanced forms.[8] In his review of early modern scholarship for 2017, Henry S. Turner laments the paucity of only two race monographs being published, the majority of publications being devoted to ecocriticism, with a focus on animal studies.[9] Turner observes: "Put most sharply, we might wonder: how has it come to pass that the creaturely life of sheep, oranges, and yeast seem more significant than the life of Caliban, say – the lives of slaves and persons of color?"[10] I read Turner's critique not as a dismissal of any specific research agenda, but instead as an attempt to call attention to particular scholarly acts of deferral and displacement. The intense, legitimate interest in "creaturely life" can work to suspend discussions of race, in effect, urging us to look away from the uneasy questions of injustice to fellow humans and the role of whiteness in the historical arc of that display of inhumanity. As a response to this longstanding disciplinary pattern and practice, in 2020 the RaceB4Race Executive Board delivered a polemic against institutional gatekeeping by journals whose editorial boards profess inclusion despite an actual record of meager publications of premodern race scholarship.[11] Admittedly, gatekeeping has always been a part of any professional and academic effort to set and maintain standards of scholarship and practice. I understand the Executive Board's call, however, as an attempt to redress the inconsistency between editorial boards' stated purpose and action.

What began as a groundswell of skepticism toward so-called unhistorical methods in the 1990s has endured, though bereft of the historical cudgel.[12] Even after "more than twenty years of scholarship in early modern studies," Peter Erickson and Kim F. Hall remark in a 2016 special issue of *Shakespeare Quarterly*, "we can only conclude that these acts of refusal are also due to a pathological averseness to thinking about race under the guise

of protecting historical difference."[13] Importantly, I would add, early modern race studies initiated a revolution that challenged the pre-existing methodological and hermeneutic status quo, expanded the range and substance of investigatory inquiry, rendered explicit the political stakes of critical representation, and effected a reorientation of intellectual perspective in Shakespeare and premodern texts.[14] What has become increasingly clear in hindsight is that the opposition to early modern race studies betrayed a profound understanding of the challenges to established practices that were slow to change. More tellingly, the resistance constituted a political response to the calling out of the dominant white epistemology that was the unstated coin of the critical realm.

Traditional reading and interpretive habits have left us unprepared, therefore, to fully appreciate Shakespeare's persistent appeal to notions of race through textual evidence in his works that is often passed over or misrecognized. More than anything, race unsettles the epistemological status quo and disturbs long-held intellectual positions that have become normalized so that the response to the question, "How have scholars adjusted to the evidence of Shakespeare's racial interests?" can be stated briefly: the playwright's investment has been subject to resistance. However, rather than simply remark on this opposition, as many have done, *Black Shakespeare: Reading and Misreading Race* shifts the focus to the cause and purpose and locates resistance to race in the historical conditions that shape readers, inform their epistemologies, and influence their reading practices. This book argues that the tension between the textual signs of blackness and the modern scholar–reader's blindness to this racial evidence derives from a cultural conditioning, intellectual formation, and epistemological predisposition identified in this study as *systemic whiteness*, the derivative of institutional and structural norms that have created white privilege, preference, and bias.

Reading, as explicitly evoked in the book's subtitle, refers primarily to the kinds of textual engagements that are central to the production of scholarship and criticism. Related to that definition is the work of interpretation, evaluation, and debating that includes the range of dialogue and exchange from the classroom, the academic symposium, and the work of editors and publishers, to the textual interactions of theater directors, actors, and audiences. Race, as typically invoked and understood, describes otherness, concerns people of color and, more often than not, as Patricia J. Williams maintains, "permits whites to entertain the notion that race lives 'over there' on the other side of the tracks, in the black bodies and inner-city neighborhoods, in the dark netherworld where whites are not

involved."[15] A complicating factor is "race obliviousness," since for most whites, Harlon Dalton argues, whiteness as race "is simply part of the unseen, unproblematic background."[16] Thus, to discuss reading Shakespeare is not just to recognize, concede, or confront the culturally learned slippages and maneuvers of avoiding race, but also to locate whiteness within the enterprise and to understand whiteness itself as a source of racial blindness. To discuss reading Shakespeare is to admit that reading as a culturally embedded activity is informed by complex social pressures implied in the paradigm of seeing and not seeing race, accounting or not accounting for whiteness.

Moreover, while the advent of early modern race studies substantially changed the dialogue in Shakespeare scholarship and criticism, it has not, to date, likewise addressed the specific questions concerning the reader.[17] In this study, the reader is situated at the juncture of the fact of early modern blackness and critical denial. Ayanna Thompson asserts in *Passing Strange* that "race is the giant elephant in the room," at once a confirmation of the intensive, fruitful advance in race scholarship as well as an open question about early modern scholars' reaction to the impact of race in Shakespeare studies, with more than a hint at residual skepticism and discomfort in the field.[18] The matter of response takes us directly to the critic as reader. To revisit Thompson's provocative metaphor, one must ask today whether the *racialized reader* is the elephant in the room of Shakespeare and early modern studies. The answer bears significantly on the protocols and practice of literary criticism, where the reader, ranging from student and dramaturg to professional scholar and critic, sits at a nexus of considerable privilege. Such a reader is the focus of *Black Shakespeare*: *Reading and Misreading Race*.

Finding the Reader

Literary criticism, involving acts of reading and the interpretation of texts, has been instrumental to the sustained growth of Shakespeare as a body of work with immense cultural and intellectual influence. While different literary movements and schools of theory have exerted their influence on the practice of criticism, the reader has remained a curiously "underprivileged" category of attention.[19] Gregory Castle observes that the "importance of the reader in literary theory has long been acknowledged, but the reader's role has typically been subordinated."[20] Reception or reader-response theory is a notable exception, positing reading as a dynamic process requiring the reader to actualize the text's verbal codes in the

construction of meaning.[21] To fulfill this function, "the reader will bring to the work certain 'pre-understandings,' a dim context of beliefs and expectations within which the work's various features will be assessed."[22] Even such a promising acknowledgment is insufficiently cognizant of the reader's material grounding in the historical matrix of race that in today's cultural environment powerfully informs the critic–reader's "pre-understandings." Moreover, if, as Terry Eagleton explains, the importance of reading for Wolfgang Iser "is that it brings us into deeper self-consciousness [and] catalyzes a more critical view of our identities,"[23] the modern profusion of critical theories has studiously avoided the epistemological significance of the critic–reader's racial identity in producing criticism and scholarship. Referencing reader-response theory is not intended as a statement of this study's commitment to that set of critical systems. Rather, its citation is a brief measure of the distance in time since that school's emergence and the subsequent failure to fill the racial gaps and capitalize on the phenomenon of the reader embedded in history.

More recently, reading has become a phenomenon of interest beyond the remit of Shakespeare studies.[24] Focused mainly on non-dramatic works, the "methods wars"[25] have contested the various forms of close, flat, surface, distant, close but not deep, reparative, or uncritical reading; overseen the conjunction and separation of book studies and reading studies; broadened the discussion on textual materiality to include new digital forms; and attributed value to textual instability in contrast to New Criticism's preferred self-enclosed object. One must, however, distinguish between the reader and reading, the latter often used as a synonym for interpretation in literary criticism, a practice that has also come under scrutiny for being too paranoid or suspicious. More insidiously, in this growing output of theories, reading often describes an event akin to a disembodied act, one that is disinterested in the textual interlocutor, the actual human subject known as the reader. Reading in this instance becomes, in effect, a code for textuality, and abandons a full accounting of the real reader.[26] Thus, reading as commonly used among critics only implies a reading subject whose liminal existence lacks the full substance of history and culture. This study is not interested in an implied or fictional reader, to redeploy the terminology of reception theory, but has progressed to a real critic–reader historically situated in an interpretive community defined by the dynamics of race for over 400 years of United States history.

Reading involves not just words on a page, but the navigation of those words by a reader shaped by cultural habits, learned behavior, and ideologies of race. As Michel de Certeau states, "the text has a meaning only

through its readers; it changes along with them; it is ordered in accord with codes of perception that it does not control. It becomes a text only in its relation to the exteriority of the reader."[27] The main task, therefore, is to identify and define that reader external to the text. De Certeau is concerned with the class-marked "social hierarchization" of a professional elite that imposes interpretive constraints on private readers.[28] In his view, the modern, "*socially* authorized professionals and intellectuals" stand between the text and the individual reader, determining patterns of reading and interpretation that follow the tastes of the dominant class they represent.[29] In this class-centered thinking, de Certeau is influenced by Pierre Bourdieu's life-long commitment to the critique of "class domination" and inequality.[30]

The external reader can also be historicized and set within another hierarchy: the racial order that has defined the history of the West. De Certeau's observation has even greater consequences when applied to the systemic racialization of readers, where whiteness assumes an elite function in the prescriptive interpretation of texts. Implicit in de Certeau's class analysis is an argument, central to this book, waiting to be extrapolated: prescriptive readings that result from the elite function of whiteness are prone to elision, avoidance, and oversight because they are inclined to follow a white racial orthodoxy. As such, my focus turns to the scholar and critic as systemically racialized readers who produce interpretive substance and content that get distributed through multiple channels. *Black Shakespeare* is, therefore, interested in foregrounding the reader – professional or private, since race, that is whiteness, cuts across class – who occupies the transit point between the inert text and the meaning produced, as the fulcrum agent whose collective interpretive substance constitutes the body of work and idea designated "Shakespeare."

Importantly, engaging race studies, whether in opposition or in supportive practice or partnership, entails a unique burden, a weight of responsibility: it necessarily implicates the scholar, professional intellectual, or editorial board member in the racial project itself. For that reason, early modern race studies is not simply a dispassionate scholarly enterprise. Because of its unique praxis, it is one that inevitably places its racialized scholar–readers under the spotlight of self-scrutiny. As a result, the resistance to race in Shakespeare and early modern studies presents itself as a defensive form of white preservation of the racial status quo. Much more is at stake, however, than a form of anxious self-protectionism. *Black Shakespeare* argues that the history of such opposition has produced racial ellipses and gaps that define and deform reading, its interpretive acts, and

the literary criticism that ensues. In this view, the denial of race is more than a simple failure of acknowledgment. It represents the scholar–reader's deeply contradictory relationship to blackness that is driven by an epistemology of systemic whiteness formed over time, with its own learned patterns of exclusion and disavowal that affect how we read. I propose that the challenge to incorporate early modern race comprehensively into our teaching, scholarship, and professional lives is as deeply personal as it is political and that the personal is systemic.

The Reader Positioned as White

In her 1992 book *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison makes a startling claim about readers, the significance of which has yet to be grappled with in Shakespeare and early modern studies. Mounting a powerful critique of the persistent denials in literary studies about the fact of blackness and race in United States history and culture, Morrison links this tendency to critics' intellectual formation in whiteness. These denials rest on "a certain set of assumptions conventionally accepted among literary historians and critics and circulated as 'knowledge'" that separates imaginative literature and criticism from this history.[31] "This knowledge," Morrison remarks, "holds that traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States."[32] Still, this black presence, the consequence of African slavery, stands as a reality that is never eliminated but, rather, has an antithetical structural value. It insinuates itself everywhere in the imaginary and social texture of America because of its contrastive value in defining the morals, ideas, and foundational principles of the republic. The divorce of literary discourse from the fact of blackness pretends, therefore, to lift literature above the racial fray of history to create a sanitized, purified, whiter idea of the nation, one that is not itself unrelated to the peculiar interests of a perpetrating cadre of professional critics. "Above all," Morrison writes, criticism's agenda of denial has "impoverished the literature it studies."[33]

One cannot help but be struck by the pertinence of these observations, now three decades old, to the state of contemporary early modern criticism. From attempts to delegitimize the scholarship and field of early modern race studies starting in the 1990s, with claims of unhistorical, backward projection that declare, in effect, the early modern race project a spurious fiction, to the sheer resistance to race work and the different, field-reorienting questions it raises, traditional early modern and

Shakespeare studies have reacted in the ways Morrison describes. She observes succinctly, "in matters of race silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse."[34] At the center of it all is the tactical denial of blackness and race that, if successful, would create a bifurcation between early modern literature and its history of a racial presence, preserve and elevate this literature from the taint of blackness to keep it white, and, ultimately, impoverish the works through repeated acts of critical erasure.

Thirty years on from Morrison's study, denial not only signifies the futile rejection of a black presence, but also the minimization of a whiteness whose repeated manifestation as violence is, as Ibram X. Kendi argues, a threat to American democracy. In recent years and months, the motivating force of whiteness in deciding the political and cultural acts that are our history has become all too evident; yet, far too often, incidents of racist calamity are met with denial: "What is the inevitable response of Americans," Kendi writes, "to tragic stories of mass murder, of extreme destitution, of gross corruption, of dangerous injustice, of political chaos, of a raw attack on democracy within the very borders of the United States, as we witnessed at the US Capitol? *This is not who we are.*" He continues: "But the denial is normal. In the aftermath of catastrophes, when have Americans commonly admitted who we are? The heartbeat of America is denial."[35]

In the current moment, when race dominates everyday speech, media headlines, and public policy, a theory of reading that pays attention to the reader's racial formation in systemic whiteness is responsive and necessary even as it works to minimize the perception of early modern studies as removed from the racial and political realities of our time.[36] I propose, therefore, a consideration of the possible consequences for systemic whiteness on reading, positing that parts of texts get elided, become invisible, or are misconstrued because of the reader's white racial formation. Since whiteness itself has been consistently performed and defined as culturally normative and, therefore, categorized as invisible, we should not be surprised – in fact, we might *expect* – that whiteness thus understood might also privilege reading habits steeped in normative strategies of invisibility: denial, erasure, and blindness that enforce the elision of certain forms of racial content. The current rising tide of white extremism has only raised the value of normal, quotidian whiteness as benignly neutral and undemanding. The practice and critique undertaken in this study contribute to making whiteness visible so that reading, and its subsequent manifestation in early modern criticism and scholarship, remains fully connected to race as the urgent social and political concern of our time.

Seen from this perspective, the pivotal moment in Morrison's text comes early in her Preface, where its single articulation risks being overlooked. To understand the critical establishment's wariness and denial of blackness and race, Morrison suggests that we look to racial formation and identity. "For reasons that should not need explanation here," she notes, "until very recently, and regardless of the race of the author, the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white."[37] Morrison's use of the word "positioned" conveys the epistemological situatedness of the reader in the history of systemic whiteness. Woody Doane observes that in "the context of the ideology of race, 'whiteness' must be understood as a position in a specific set of social relationships."[38] "The notion of position," writes Renato Rosaldo, "refers to how life experiences both enable and inhibit particular kinds of insight."[39] Importantly, that position bears a significant historical component. Morrison's incisive phrase "positioned as white" encapsulates the reader's social, political, and cultural situatedness in the world as deriving from a history that has produced a clearly constructed social identity and recognizable racial mentality. According to Stuart Hall, "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past."[40] Such identities are culturally embedded and carry the weight, meaning, and expectation assigned through historical formation. Morrison's designation of whiteness as the reader's unique cultural and political identity is grounded in a specific locality that orients perception and knowledge. Moreover, Morrison points to "a more or less tacit agreement among literary scholars that, because American literature has been clearly the preserve of white male views, genius, and power, those views, genius, and power are without relationship to and removed from the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States."[41] Readerly whiteness is a situated identity that draws its meaning, political agency, and outlook from the historical disposition toward white racial preference that has defined the American experience.

Given Morrison's argument, the general interest in the reader paves the way to speak more specifically about scholars as readers "positioned as white" who produce, as a result of that situated identity, the impoverished literary criticism she laments. This book expands and historically reframes this notion of the reading subject "positioned as white" to propose a theory of reading that turns on the tension between an early modern black presence and the modern white reader. Recognizing the reader's epistemological, cultural, and political position opens new directions for theories of

reading by concentrating on the racial formation of the white reader. Applied to Shakespeare, however, this new set of theoretical and methodological opportunities is complicated by questions of the white reader's capacity and competence to admit and process the racial content of Shakespeare's texts. Whiteness, because of its obfuscating and evasive maneuvers, struggles to contend with race. The central premise of *Black Shakespeare*, therefore, argues for a historically compelled and situated reader whose engagement with race is hampered by whiteness' inherent epistemological limitations.

Reading Through the Filters of Race

The scholarly avoidance of seeing blackness and reading race in early modern studies runs parallel to the evolution of Shakespeare as the literary avatar of English culture. Scholars have not traditionally identified blackness and read race, the process of recognizing and assigning social and political meaning to somatic and textual signs. Moreover, in the standard accounts of Shakespeare's rise to iconic status, the actual reader is often a liminal presence, even though the human work, assessment, and judgment that follow from reading are everywhere implied. The Preface to the First Folio envisaged the connection between print, literacy, and reading.[42] By the eighteenth century, scholarly editions of his works, multiple adaptations of his plays, dictionaries of Shakespearean quotations, Shakespeare biographies, and the beginning of curricular inclusion in secondary and higher education all contributed to what Michael Dobson describes as "the extensive cultural work that went into the installation of Shakespeare as England's National Poet."[43] In particular, the slew of collected editions by Nicholas Rowe (1709), Alexander Pope (1725), Lewis Theobald (1733), Thomas Hanmer (1744), Samuel Johnson (1765), and Edmond Malone (1790), created a conversation about textual accuracy even as more moderate pricing appealed to an expanded readership, so that "reading Shakespeare rather than seeing Shakespeare in performance was becoming the primary mode for experiencing his plays."[44]

Fully intertwined with the nation's political mythology, Shakespeare was pressed further into the service of imperial literacy: "Throughout the period of the Seven Years' War and its aftermath, as Britain acquired ever greater colonial dependencies in the East and the Americas, ever larger claims were made for the national poet's art, praised more and more insistently in terms of world exploration and conquest."[45] It was in this moment of British colonial expansion that the initial stages of the

American appropriation of Shakespeare invested the writer's new transatlantic home with "its own national and imperial project" in ways that justified the words of the poet Peter Markoe: "Shakespeare's bold spirit seeks our western shore."[46] The teeming, ebullient energies of the sixteenth-century playhouse were supplanted in the twentieth by the studious professionalization of an academic Shakespeare who was "destined to become the Shakespeare of the college and university, and even more the Shakespeare of private and select culture."[47] Throughout the historical accounts of Shakespeare's print and textual reception, the unraced "Great Variety" of readers was the prevailing unstated assumption.

The eighteenth-century consolidation of national Shakespeare was also the historical highpoint of the capture, ownership, and forced labor of African people within the global network of the intercontinental triangular slave trade. If the interlocking histories of Shakespeare and race were not already evident, the timing of the Enlightenment canonization of Shakespeare only confirmed this fact. As scholars of American history have come to recognize, the seeming contradiction of the declaration of freedom and inalienable rights in a slaveholding nation lay bare a stark truth: the enslavement of black Africans was the very portrait and premise of un-freedom on which the founding fathers' articulation of liberty and rights was imagined. Toni Morrison writes that the "slave population, it could be and was assumed, offered itself up as the surrogate selves for meditation on the problems of human freedom, its lure and its elusiveness."[48] The black population's social objectification, insofar as this enslaved group was denied power and absorption into the cultural mainframe, provided the requisite political foil. A similar formation of English identity follows from the intersecting projects of cultural nationalism and British colonial slavery.[49] Thus, the Enlightenment moment of English national Shakespeare requires a contrapuntal reading: What is Englishness when the very idea of national identity is being constructed in contrast to and at the expense of tortured black bodies?[50] Not coincidentally, a similarly insistent question sets the stage for Shakespeare studies today: What does it mean to be American when the very ideals of equality and democracy are deformed by the daily brutality of a seemingly endless black body count? The cultural work required of Enlightenment Shakespeare in enforcing a vision of Englishness was to push the acknowledgment of black bodies to the margins in order to build, despite its ostensible neutrality, what was in truth a white national mythology. It is thus that the portrait and premise of blackness became the necessary building block on which whiteness, Englishness' distinguishing racial

feature, was constructed. As a result, Shakespeare's cooptation into both the English and American nationalist discourse means that his dramatic oeuvre had to be stripped, sanitized, and made white for that particular cultural task – a project of rhetorical segregation. It follows, therefore, that the critical tradition of Shakespeare has been unraced, that it has effectively reproduced the apparent racial disinterest of white Shakespeare.

Missing from standard accounts of the nexus of Shakespeare, English cultural nationalism, British imperial expansion, and his American appropriation is what W. J. T. Mitchell calls the racial frame, a useful concept to initiate this book's examination of the conjunction of race, culture, and reading Shakespeare. Writing in 2012, Mitchell argued fiercely "the continuing presence of racism in the world today."[51] Since then, in the United States, immigration has become an expansive code for branding people of color; white extremism is on the rise; a global pandemic exposed the racial fault lines in a culture of chronic inequality; "I can't breathe" entered the lexicon of protest against police killing of black persons; and racial vitriol in large doses was delivered routinely to the public by "America's First White President," to adopt Ta-Nehisi Coates's incisive moniker.[52] Writing in the middle of the Obama presidency, an administration helmed by an African American whose election was heralded in many quarters as a sign of the end of race, Mitchell pushed back against the premature declarations of a postracial America.[53] Confronting the racial realities that continue to define the United States, Mitchell countered postracial denialism with a proposal of racial accountability. More than "an object to be represented visually or verbally, or a thing to be depicted in a likeness or image," race is "not simply something to be seen, but itself a framework for seeing through." Race should be reimagined as "a frame, a window, a screen, or a lens," Mitchell explains, "a repertoire of cognitive and conceptual filters through which forms of human otherness are mediated."[54] The intervention made by early modern race studies has for some time, in fact, argued for such a revisionary "framework" for traditional Shakespeare studies, a scholarly industry that has remained for quite some time skeptical of race. Importantly, the stark reality of our contemporary society saturated by racial debates compels us to ponder the effects of race on our most mundane activities as well as our highly prized cultural engagements like reading Shakespeare. This book examines, therefore, the impact of racial formation on modern scholarship's reading practices. This scholarship, in turn, continues to influence Shakespeare's widest contemporary audience – students by way of classroom instruction – and is in constant dialogue with theater and film artists' readings and interpretations of Shakespeare.

In what is a profound irony, the field of Shakespeare and early modern studies has already been forged in racial terms – it has been historically a de facto white field – despite the general reluctance to grapple with that fact, submit it to analysis, and take its significance into account. Among full-time faculty, nationally, roughly 75 percent are white, with much smaller numbers for Black (5 percent) and Hispanic (4 percent) professors as reported in 2016.[55] If we use the registrant self-reporting for the 2019 Shakespeare Association of America conference as a rough gauge, the data revealed: White 79.1 percent; Black, African or African American 1.6 percent; Latinx or Hispanic 2.4 percent; Asian, South Asian, and/or Asian American 4.3 percent; Native, Indigenous, and/or Pacific Islander 0.4 percent.[56] Moreover, the field has been marked historically by hesitation and, in some instances, outright resistance to race. The tradition of Shakespeare scholarship has always engaged in the practice of seeing through race, understood in this instance as a specifically resistant white racial framework, even though reconciling to the full consequence of that admission has been held in abeyance. The Shakespeare industry's primary traditional stakeholders and gatekeepers – academics, scholars, critics, educators, teachers, book and journal publishers, theater practitioners, members of professional organizations, devotees, and donors who support programs, performances, and institutions with their dollars – have shared more than a white racial demographic; they have been the beneficiaries of a cultural and intellectual formation that, for too long, has denied the relevance of race.

During a recent roundtable hosted by black artists from the Stratford Festival, for example – all of whom I consider part of the collective reading, interpretive practice – they identified a creative environment in which their blackness was in constant retreat because of what can only be described as a culture of whiteness and institutional gaslighting.[57] Keith Hamilton Cobb's *American Moor* (2020) is a searing portrayal of white racial pressures and exclusions in the Shakespeare performance arena.[58] The difficulties expressed by these artists point to whiteness' chronic affiliation with gross inequality. AnnLouise Keating writes, "'whiteness' and its 'violent denials of difference' serve a vital function in masking social and economic inequalities of contemporary western culture."[59] According to Timothy Barnett, whiteness' veiled effects are also of considerable concern in education: English studies as a "discipline remains unable to question its own 'white ground' despite the very real gains scholars have made in coming to understand reading and writing in relation to human difference."[60] Mitchell's approach to race's function as a governing intellectual frame is

germane to acts of reading and interpretation, therefore, when considered in the context of Shakespeare and the mostly unexamined presumption of the field's "white ground."[61] Conceiving of race as a filter and frame for reading shifts our attention to interrogating its salient organizing perspective; its propensity for denial and epistemological violence; and its tendency to limit seeing, comprehending, and accounting for the racial signs in Shakespeare's texts.

My goal is not to attempt a full report on the vast topic of reading, but in a study that is fundamentally concerned with the racial motives of interpreting Shakespeare, my specific theoretical interest lies in highlighting the role whiteness plays in acts of reading. Shakespeare has come to represent high art, elite culture, and intellectual cachet even when those designations go against his works' popular roots in early modern theater and have assumed a distinctly white racial cast in contemporary culture. While one might posit a cultural coordination of elite Shakespeare with demographic or class identity, more fundamental to the argument is the indisputable fact of *systemic whiteness*, the structuration of knowledge and identity, that defines American society such that no one is excluded from the claims that whiteness makes on reading subjects.[62] In my view, the country's history of systemic whiteness, related, though not exclusively, to the politics of black enslavement, enables a defective epistemology and creates *racial blind spots* that misrecognize both the signs and embodied realities of "human otherness" as well as whiteness itself. *Black Shakespeare* argues that systemic whiteness, the racial framework within which criticism and scholarship have been produced for centuries and which reproduce that system itself, inhibits and constrains the practices of reading and interpretation. Unless one believes that literary criticism is hermetically sealed off from the world in which it is produced, the current state of affairs concerning race in the United States is undeniably an issue that cannot, and should not, be avoided. Neither can we neglect accounting for the predominant whiteness of our field as a matter intricately related to the racial urgency of our time.

As such, the current state of racial foment must serve as yet another reminder and opportunity for scholarship to be accountable to its readership and commit to a practical purpose. At stake is the notion of *racial literacy*, which demands a transformational competence in understanding race – its politics, history, and epistemologies – for reading texts and to know *how to be* in relation to others to meet the demands of a modern, just, plural democracy. Racial literacy requires the acquisition of a reading competence in response to overdetermined histories of erasure, dismissal,

or forgetting of racial facts, including the facts of whiteness. Racial literacy is at once textual and practical, literary and cultural, intellectual and political in exercising the practice of textual hermeneutics in the domain of everyday living. The historical demands, at this moment, cannot concede or condone racial illiteracy and the ignorance of knowing how to be *in relation to others and oneself*. Racial literacy, in this study, constitutes a responsibility facing a range of persons including teachers, editors, theater practitioners, and general readers even though my discussion will often address scholars who serve a central interpretive function in the Shakespeare industry. So, from the classroom to performance spaces, instruction must aim to better equip us all to contribute to a debating world that struggles to confront systems and structures of racial inequality that were, we cannot fail to recognize, instituted at the nation's inception. While I attend to broad structural features that affect reading, I recognize that the work of racial decoloniality operates at the local level – across diverse nations and territories, but also from within professional organizations to the geographies of individual classrooms – where the search for means toward an egalitarian society is engaged.[63] It is no longer sufficient to be not racist, as we have come to understand, but we must be actively and declaratively antiracist. The book's overall concern with racial literacy has this collaborative and antiracist project in mind, as the closing chapter and Epilogue affirm.

To be clear, whiteness is more than skin color; it is an ideology that saturates and an epistemology that creates its own fictions and ways of seeing the world and texts. Yet, somatic whiteness has become the most readily identifiable marker of white racial belonging and a powerful shorthand for a set of complex moral and intellectual processes that allows subjects all too easily to blindly assent and conform to what appears to be a set of overlapping and synonymous categorical frames. Since systemic whiteness is institutional and pervasive, it affects everyone, regardless of self-proclaimed racial identification. The deployment of Shakespeare along with other British works in the matrix of colonial education, for example, promoted mental identification – "a determination to turn blacks into whites, or Africans into Europeans" – despite a marked discontinuity in the somatic appearance of colonial subjects.[64] Still, in instances where persons of color are constantly reminded of their non-affiliation with whiteness, their racial exclusion can foster a critical consciousness of white dominance and an awareness of the insidiousness of dysfunctional white epistemologies. The black intellectual tradition has been, in major part, a frontal assault on miseducation, especially of persons of color, in order to undo the

hegemonic thrall of white-dominant intellectual frameworks. Black and postcolonial studies, along with a rich conglomerate of ethnic studies emerging since the last decades of the twentieth century, have given serious thought to the decolonization of the mind and critiqued white reason.[65]

Those self-identified as white are, however, in constant danger of surrender to a deeply flawed logic that so fuses and equates somatic signification to epistemological operation that they appear seamlessly unified and one. An easy blurring of categories enables this confusing conflation: white skin, a physical trait, is equated to the process of socialization of white intellectual identity within histories of differential power and exceptionalism. Because of their fair or white skin, such persons continue to be implicated in the routines of whiteness and are more at risk of being unprepared, naïve readers whose complicity in white epistemology creates severe disadvantages for reading race. To institute change, one cannot continue to conflate white skin and the legacy of a defective white epistemology, but must break this linkage to make conscious and visible the possibilities of constructing antiracist *forms of whiteness*. Somatic identity must be dislodged from white epistemological conditioning to secure a hard-won intellectual liberation within that disjuncture. Breaking apart this nexus of conflation creates the possibilities for a new epistemological space in which to imagine and inhabit different and diverse forms of whiteness appropriate for a just, equitable antiracist practice and commitment. Faced with the racial urgency that has come to define the current state of American culture and society, readers can no longer afford to be naïve or uninvested in understanding their racial position if they aspire to justice and accountability and to have the teaching and representation of Shakespeare matter.

The Critique of Whiteness

Registering the continued growth of the field, some recent accounts of early modern race studies note with justifiable excitement the current second-wave renaissance of scholarship.[66] In the short period since Peter Erickson and Kim F. Hall's recommendations in 2016 for future directions in scholarship, encouraging signs of engagements with race are evident in published essays, special issues of journals, plenaries, symposia, and workshops dedicated to field-expanding intersections and inquiries.[67] Among the seven areas targeted by Erickson and Hall for major new research is "early modern whiteness studies. The use of the term 'race' to mean only 'black' or 'of color' is unsatisfactory even in the Renaissance.

The full complexity of the term becomes accessible when whiteness as a racial category is also examined."[68] Whiteness studies, they observe, is already a substantial subfield within critical race studies, but one whose impact has yet to be fully realized in early modern race studies.[69] "There is a growing realization," write Monica McDermott and Frank L. Samson, "that one cannot fully understand the existence of racism and racial inequality without paying close attention to the formation and maintenance of white racial identity."[70] A whiteness studies approach redirects the sole focus of attention away from the racial other to pose pertinent questions about the formation of white identity and the operations of a white epistemology in comprehending representations of others in a move that makes whiteness' reading disability and political purpose more legible.

Beginning around 1990, whiteness studies emerged in a decade marked by seminal works of which Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* is the singularly noteworthy representative in literary analysis. Other studies include David R. Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness* (1991), Theodore W. Allen's *The Invention of the White Race, Volumes 1 and 2* (1994 and 1997), Richard Dyer's *White* (1997), and Matthew Frye Jacobson's *Whiteness of a Different Color* (1998).[71] Notably, none of these took the early modern period as its subject. As a subfield, whiteness studies envisioned an antiracist program with two overarching claims: that whiteness is a construct, that is, an ideology, and that its existence is predicated on self-perpetuating privilege.[72] Consequently, whiteness is not neutral or naïve but constitutes a highly motivated social project. "Historians working in this subfield," argues Robert P. Baird, "demonstrated the myriad ways in which the pursuit of white supremacy – like the pursuit of wealth and the subjection of women – had been one of the central forces that gave shape to Anglo-American history."[73] Roediger pressed the case of whiteness' consuming self-interest further: "it is not merely that whiteness is oppressive and false; it is that whiteness is nothing but oppressive and false."[74] Given my specific focus on the scholar of early modern studies as a white reader who interprets texts and disseminates knowledge, my intention is not to re-center such a figure but to question the epistemological tendencies and reading practices that continue to inform and give organizing shape to the field of early modern studies.[75] With the renaissance of attention to early modern critical race studies, which includes a new and growing multicultural coalition of scholar–readers, such an inquiry acquires renewed urgency to understand the specific nature of the impact and challenges of reading, now and going forward.

Whiteness studies' overlapping chronology with the substantive beginnings of early modern race studies is noteworthy for the delay in cross-fertilization over the past three decades. Faced with skepticism and outright hostility, early modern critical race studies had the ethical and intellectual responsibility to establish the disciplinary ground on which it stands. Making whiteness a central project in those earliest years, though its antithetical presence was everywhere implied, would have seemed counterintuitive, delaying further the scholarship on the cultural politics of blackness and race. Despite scholars' intent to "problematize" whiteness, at the time Margaret Talbot warned of the insidiousness of privilege: "the whole enterprise gives whites a kind of standing in the multicultural paradigm they have never before enjoyed. And it involves them, inevitably, in a journey of self-discovery in which white people's thoughts about their own whiteness acquire a portentous new legitimacy."[76] Michael Eric Dyson eyed with suspicion what he regarded as the narcissistic monopolization of institutional resources: "At the very moment when African-American studies and Asian-American studies and so on are really coming into their own, you have whiteness studies shifting the focus and maybe the resources back to white people and their perspective."[77] However, the continued expressions of white supremacy into the twenty-first century that lead Coates to declare whiteness "an existential danger to the country and the world," demand a direct, frontal critique.[78]

Black Shakespeare addresses in a timely fashion, therefore, the missing intersection of whiteness studies and early modern race studies by concentrating on one of the most paradoxically inarticulate phenomena in Shakespeare studies: the white reader as scholar whose body of critical and theoretical work sustains the political infrastructure of the Shakespeare academic and performance industry. Baird situates white silence as a convenient retreat from public discourse in the immediate aftermath of the reckoning of the 1960s: "many white people found it easier to decide that the civil rights movement had accomplished all the anti-racism work that needed doing," while continuing "to exercise the institutional and structural power that had accumulated on their behalf across the previous three centuries."[79] I examine this silence, hesitation, and refusal to name whiteness as a dispositive scholarly identity that has enormous power in the academic community. The history of silence around whiteness is one of its prodigiously effective strategies of disciplinary regulation. Simon Clarke and Steve Garner set out the key concerns: "Whiteness, as a form of ethnicity, is rarely acknowledged by its bearers, yet it has significant

ramifications in terms of the construction of 'other' identities; in the creation of community; in processes of exclusion and inclusion; and discourses around 'race' and nation."[80] A whiteness studies critique in Shakespeare and early modern studies understands that the scholarly hesitations about race are rooted in an anxious defense of whiteness often fashioned in the cool language of scholarly rigor and historical precision, terms that have become effectively racialized – as if intellectual rigor were the sole prerogative of a white scholarly majority. The implication impugns both the content and intellectual quality of research produced by scholars of color specifically; it impugns the scholars of color themselves.

It follows that the historical reluctance to consider race in early modern studies is also inseparable from debates about identity politics, meaning in this instance the role racial identity plays in the scholarly projects selected. Stated baldly, persons of color research race, and the meritless questions raised about this scholarship replay the unfortunate, discriminatory racial tribalism that has riven our national history.[81] Directed at persons of color, the charge of identity politics is meant to delegitimize an intellectual position, casting it as an essentialist bias based in a reductively vague biological premise that recreates the familiar hierarchy of the mind–body split. Given their tendency toward racial self-effacement, whites might find the application of the concept to themselves surprising: "Whites' hegemonic position in the social order 'normalizes' Whiteness in ways that make it elusive to those who have it. Whites' numerical advantage in the United States further reduces the perceptual salience of White racial identity."[82] However, based on their research, the psychologists Eric D. Knowles and Christopher K. Marshburn argue "that Whites routinely engage in identity politics, acting in ways that further their interests as members of the dominant group."[83] And bell hooks decries the sidestepping of "progressive white intellectuals" who criticize identity in race scholarship but "have not focused their critiques on white identity and the way essentialism informs representations of whiteness."[84]

The self-awareness of white identity must be leveraged for antiracist purpose or recuperative work that, in the words of Dyson, "names a whiteness that doesn't want to be named, disrobes a whiteness that dresses in camouflage as humanity, unmasks a whiteness costumed as American, and fetches to center stage a whiteness that would rather hide in visible invisibility."[85] The matter is not simply that whites traffic in identity politics, too, a mere turning of the table, though the table in this metaphor has historically been set for the privileged. Rather, the acknowledgment of white identity politics breaks the silence around the white

scholar as reader to examine the veiled political self-interests that, ironic-
ally, have operated in plain sight. Thus, while the implicit charge of
identity politics hovers over the debates concerning early modern race
studies, we must be similarly attuned to the unstated white identity politics
that have governed the wider field. Looking at the hitherto largely invisible
whiteness of early modern critics is a project in visibility that calls out
whiteness, examines its strategies and epistemologies, and tests its stamina
in the hope of ultimately effecting a more inclusive scholarship that is truer
and more sensitive to the texts and the cultural histories they represent.
Noting the defenses and emotions unleashed when white entitlement and
privilege are challenged, Robin DiAngelo argues that "we can practice
building our stamina for the critical examination of white identity –
a necessary antidote to white fragility."[86] Reading, understood within
a racial literacy frame, is a practice and exercise for accomplishing more
than testing the fragility or resilience of whiteness by arming readers with
the means to pursue personal and structural reform toward a more just and
equitable society.

Black Shakespeare

The twenty-first century has witnessed the crippling encroachment of toxic
whiteness on the integrity of American democratic institutions, cultural
ethos, and political discourse. If there was ever a moment to address
whiteness in literary and Shakespeare studies, it is now. *Black
Shakespeare*, because it insists on Shakespeare's investment in issues of
race, asserts the urgency of confronting myriad forms of prejudice, exclu-
sion, and discrimination as instances of quotidian bias with the capacity to
metastasize without the steadfast vigilance of an aware, responsible reader.
Further delays in collective and individual accountability in Shakespeare
studies only prolong the sort of erasures around whiteness that in the wider
culture have allowed the destructive politics of extremism to grow. The
juxtaposition of Shakespeare and racial politics is intended to highlight the
prevalent insidiousness of racial ignorance that must be combated across all
fronts. As a result, the book argues for the reader's social readiness, through
the epistemological work of engaging with literary studies, for personal,
political, and ethical reform in a culture grappling with questions of social
equity and justice.

The organizational arc of the book proceeds from defining the racialized
reader positioned within a culture of systemic whiteness; identifying the
obstacles or blind spots whiteness poses to reading; to, ultimately,

envisioning an antiracist, critical practice informed by racial literacy. Remarking on the inattention among critics about the function of the white reader, Chapter 1, "The Racialized Reader," attends to the racial formation of the American reader from a historical perspective. It argues, as a result, that the racialized reader produces acts of reading and interpretation that are inhibited by the epistemological imperatives of a conditioning culture of systemic whiteness. Chapter 2, "Racial Blind Spots: Misreading Bodies, Misreading Texts," disputes traditional arguments about the temporal emergence of white identity, extending the historical parameters of white racial formation back to Shakespeare, who is especially attentive to the impact of whiteness in producing racial blind spots that subvert the audience's racial and, hence, interpretive knowledge in *Othello*. These two opening chapters provide the historical and theoretical frame for understanding how racial blind spots have engendered acute oversights and misreadings of Shakespeare, as demonstrated in the remaining chapters. Chapter 3, "Antonio's 'Fair Flesh' and The Property of Whiteness," maintains that criticism has been blind to the racialized whiteness of Antonio's skin that is the cause of Shylock's targeted resistance to the racial oppression festering in the city state of *The Merchant of Venice*. Fomenting this tense, violent atmosphere, Antonio asserts and models the authority of the white reader who denies the role of race in textual interpretation and, thereby, rejects the hermeneutic and human validity of being made racially literate. Chapter 4, "Hamlet: Playing in the Dark," proclaims *Hamlet* a race play: scholars have been blind to Hamlet's appropriation of "black" subjectivity in the guise of the new and emergent theatrical Violent Black Man type. In his pursuit of revenge, Hamlet equivocates in his relationship toward blackness, which he, nevertheless, feels obliged to coopt for his own racial improvisation that renders black humanity a casualty of white interests. Chapter 5, "We Are Othello," concentrates on the blindness to Othello's centuries-old challenge to audiences and readers to speak of him, a black man, justly and with racial competence. This chapter extends the examination of Hamlet's personal ambivalence toward blackness to question how in telling Othello's story we can test our resilience and reliability in matters of race, seeing literary analysis as a window of accountability onto the contemporary world of racial politics. The closing chapter effects a transition to the Epilogue, "Forms of Whiteness," which concludes explicitly on the book's appeal for a self-reflective, antiracist scholarly practice and pedagogy.

I have selected three of the most popular and best-known of Shakespeare's plays, *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Hamlet*, which have been subjected to centuries of criticism and performance commentary, to make

the point about the scholar–reader's tendency toward racial erasure even more forcefully. Even among plays so routinely studied and performed, our intellectual formation in systemic whiteness blinds us from seeing important racial content. Each chapter also incorporates an instance of antiblackness or white supremacy in US history to introduce a problematic of reading and misreading race that the chapter analyzes. These include: James Baldwin's meditation on the cultural avoidance of race in America as he traveled the South in the 1950s; the eighteenth-century antiliteracy laws that granted whites the exclusive rights to reading literacy as well as the politically fraught authority to read and determine the semantic value of corporal blackness; the refusal of an implacable nineteenth-century plantation owner to entertain the redemption of a fugitive slave's full freedom over preference for the escaped man's lifeless flesh; the 2021 US Capitol insurrection, its relation to white extremism and indebtedness to the lie of black inferiority; and the recent spate of killings of unarmed black men and women. Together these chapters simultaneously ground whiteness within the historical contexts of modernity while upending the stipulation of whiteness' post-Enlightenment appearance to posit a longer history extending back to Shakespeare's time. Together, they challenge reading orthodoxy in the book's commitment to racial literacy's capacity to sustain an attentive, renovative scholarship.

Finally, I would like to suggest that "Black Shakespeare" is both a descriptive and critical concept. "Black Shakespeare" reminds us that race has so suffused Western culture and thinking that the failure to remark on race does not leave our scholarship unmarked by race. To this end, the term "black" is also meant to invite expansive reflection and inclusion of other racial codes and identities in early modern texts typically identified as nonwhite, even as I focus in this study on the critical function of racialized blackness. Importantly, I intend the term to relate to multiple indices of race, to be generative and expansive in critical capacity, so that "Black Shakespeare" is not limited to a specific content but refers to a positionality and critical operation of destabilizing the perceptual and epistemological tendencies in Shakespeare studies in the interest of a renovative, emancipatory, inclusive practice.[87]

Notes

1 *Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies* (London: Isaac Jaggard and Edward Blount, 1623), A3r.
2 Coverage of black characters in early modern drama is undertaken by Anthony Gerard Barthelemy, *Black Face, Maligned Race: The Representation of Blacks in*

English Drama from Shakespeare to Southerne (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987) and Elliot H. Tokson, *The Popular Image of the Black Man in English Drama, 1550–1688* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982).

3 Elizabeth Spiller, *Reading and the History of Race in the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

4 Imtiaz Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500–1677: Imprints of the Invisible* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2008); Ruben Espinosa and David Ruiter, eds., *Shakespeare and Immigration* (New York: Routledge, 2016); James Walvin, *The Black Presence: A Documentary History of the Negro in England 1555–1860* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971); see also T. F. Earle and K. J. P. Lowe, eds., *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Jonathan Spicer, ed., *Revealing the African Presence in Renaissance Europe* (Baltimore: Walters Art Museum, 2012); Ania Loomba and Jonathan Burton, eds., *Race in Early Modern England: A Documentary Companion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and Paul Edwards, "The Early African Presence in the British Isles," in *Essays on the History of Blacks in Britain*, ed. Jagdish G. Gundera and Ian Duffield (Aldershot: Avebury, 1992): 9–29.

5 For a comprehensive review of the relevant scholarship, see Dennis Austin Britton, "Recent Studies in English Renaissance Literature," *English Literary Renaissance* 45.3 (2015): 459–478. I would highlight the following: Ayanna Thompson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Joyce Green MacDonald, *Shakespearean Adaptation, Race, and Memory in the New World* (New York: Palgrave, 2020); Patricia Akhimie, *Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference: Race and Conduct in the Early Modern World* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Matthieu Chapman, *Anti-Black Racism in Early Modern English Drama* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Dennis Austin Britton, *Becoming Christian: Race, Reformation, and Early Modern English Romance* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); Peter Erickson, "Invisibility Speaks: Servants and Portraits in Early Modern Visual Culture," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 9(2009): 23–61; Ian Smith, *Race and Rhetoric in the Renaissance: Barbarian Errors* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Ayanna Thompson, *Performing Race and Torture on the Early Modern Stage* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Sujata Iyengar, *Shades of Difference: Mythologies of Skin Color in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Ania Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Peter Erickson and Clark Hulse, eds., *Early Modern Visual Culture: Representation, Race, and Empire in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Margo Hendricks, "Race: A Renaissance Category?" in *A Companion to English Literature and Culture*, ed. Michael Hattaway (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2000); Arthur Little Jr., *Shakespeare Jungle Fever: National-Imperial Re-Visions of Race, Rape, and Sacrifice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Joyce Green MacDonald, ed., *Race, Ethnicity, and Power in the Renaissance* (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997); Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early*

Modern England (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); and Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker, eds., *Women, "Race," and Writing in Early Modern England* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

6 Contrast Michael Neil's skepticism in "'Mullatos,' 'Blacks,' and 'Indian Moors': *Othello* and Early Modern Constructions of Human Difference," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 49.4 (1998), 361–374 with Vanessa Corredera, "'Not a Moor exactly': Shakespeare, *Serial*, and Modern Constructions of Race," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 61.1 (2016), 30–50.

7 Ania Loomba addresses some critics' rejection of color consciousness in "'Delicious traffic': Racial and Religious Differences on Early Modern Stages," in *Shakespeare and Race*, ed. Catherine M. S. Alexander and Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), esp. 204.

8 Francesca T. Royster, "The 'End of Race' and the Future of Early Modern Cultural Studies," *Shakespeare Studies* 26 (1998): 59–69 (60). Matthieu Chapman's anecdotal account of his first experience at an academic conference resonates familiarly for some, in the blanket opposition to race in early modern studies delivered in the terse, uninformed indictment made by respected scholars: "There were no black people in England during Elizabeth's reign" (*Anti-Black Racism in Early Modern English Drama,* 1).

9 Henry S. Turner, "Recent Studies in Tudor and Stuart Drama," *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 58.3 (2018): 473–537. He references undertakings by the Shakespeare Association of America, the Folger Shakespeare Library, and the Globe Theatre (474).

10 Turner, "Recent Studies in Tudor and Stuart Drama," 481.

11 The Executive Board, RaceB4Race, "It's Time to End the Publishing Gatekeeping!" June 11, 2020. https://medium.com/the-sundial-acmrs/its-time-to-end-the-publishing-gatekeeping-75207525f587.

12 On this ongoing, urgent debate about the place of race in early modern studies, see Peter Erickson and Kim F. Hall, "'A New Scholarly Song': Rereading Early Modern Race," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 67.1 (2016): 1–13; and Kimberly Anne Coles, Kim F. Hall, and Ayanna Thompson, "BlacKKKShakespearean: A Call to Action for Medieval and Early Modern Studies," *Profession* (Fall 2019). https://profession.mla.org/blackkkshakespearean-a-call-to-action-for-medieval-and-early-modern-studies/.

13 Erickson and Hall, "A New Scholarly Song," 2.

14 For a comprehensive review, see Britton, "Recent Studies in English Renaissance Literature."

15 Patricia J. Williams, "In Living Black and White," *Washington Post*, March 29, 1998. www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/magazine/1998/03/29/in-living-black-and-white/929dae95-7fd3-4680-ac7b-c957f8bcef14/.

16 Harlon Dalton, "Failing to See," in *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*, ed. Paula S. Rothenberg (New York: Worth Publishers, 2012), 17.

17 On the physiological effects of reading on the early modern reader, see Spiller, *Reading and the History of Race.*

18 Ayanna Thompson, *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race, and Contemporary America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1.

19 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2008), 74.

20 Gregory Castle, *The Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory* (Malden: Blackwell, 2007), 174.

21 In addition to Eagleton, *Literary Theory,* 54–90 and Castle, *The Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory*, 174–180, see Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); Gerald Prince, "Introduction to the Study of the Narratee," in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); and Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

22 Eagleton, *Literary Theory,* 77; for an explanation of the role of the real reader's experiences as distinct from the concept of the implied reader, see Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), esp. 27–38.

23 Eagleton, *Literary Theory,* 79.

24 The recent double issue of *PMLA* is a case in point: Evelyne Ender and Deidre Shauna Lynch, eds., Special Topic: Cultures of Reading, *PMLA* 133.5 (2018) and *PMLA* 134.1 (2019). See also Leah Price and Seth Lerer, eds. Special Topic: The History of the Book and the Idea of Literature, *PMLA* 121.1 (2006).

25 Lynch and Ender, "Time for Reading," *PMLA* 133.5 (2018), 1076.

26 Iser refers to the "real reader" to distinguish this historical subject from the "implied reader," *The Act of Reading*, 27.

27 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 170.

28 Ibid., 172.

29 Ibid., 171.

30 John Lechte, *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers: From Structuralism to Post-Humanism* 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 66.

31 Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 4.

32 Ibid., 4–5.

33 Ibid., 8–9.

34 Ibid., 9.

35 Ibram X. Kendi, "Denial is the Heartbeat of America," *The Atlantic*, January 11, 2021, www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/01/denial-heartbeat-america/617631/.

36 See the use of the term "racial formation" in Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994), esp. 53–76.

37 Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, xii.

38 Woody Doane, "Rethinking Whiteness Studies," in *Whiteout: The Continuing Significance of Racism*, edited by Ashley W Doane. and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (New York: Routledge, 2003), 9.

39 Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 19. On positionality, see also Lawrence Grossberg, "Cultural Studies and/in New Worlds," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 10 (1993): 1–22, esp. 12–16; Ruth Frankenberg, "The Mirage of an Unmarked Whiteness," in *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*, edited by Birgit Brander Rasmussen et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 72–96, where Frankenberg, referencing standpoint theory and its similar concerns of political identity and conditioned perspective, writes: "Whiteness is a 'standpoint,' a location from which to see selves, others, and national and global orders" (76).

40 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Crisman (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 222–237 (225).

41 Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 5.

42 Douglas Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 24. Lanier uses the term "unpopularizing Shakespeare" to describe the evolution from the Elizabethan popular theater toward print, reading, and elite consumers (21–49).

43 Michael Dobson, *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation, and Authorship, 1660–1769* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 3. The accelerated uptick of collected editions in the eighteenth century prolonged the reflective and moralizing practices associated with individual reading. On the history of Shakespeare in print and the related theatrical intersections, see Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, 21–49; Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 11–81.

44 Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, 29.

45 Dobson, *The Making of the National Poet*, 227.

46 Quoted in Ibid., 229.

47 A. A. Lipscomb, "Uses of Shakespeare Off the Stage," quoted in Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 73; see also Leah S. Marcus, *How Shakespeare Became Colonial: Editorial Tradition and the British Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Terence Hawkes, "Swisser-Swatter: Making a Man of English Letters," in *Alternative Shakespeares*, ed. John Drakakis (New York: Methuen, 1985).

48 Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 37.

49 Susan Dwyer Amussen, *Caribbean Exchanges: Slavery and the Transformation of English Society, 1640–1700* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

50 See Edward Said's contrapuntal reading of the English upper middle-class and its dark side of West Indian plantation slavery in Jane Austen in *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994), esp. 84–97; and Lolita Chakrabarti, *Red Velvet* (New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2012). The setting of the

play is 1833, on the eve of the abolition of British slavery, and the African American actor Ira Aldridge substitutes for the English actor Edmund Kean in a production of *Othello* in London.

51 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Seeing Through Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), xi.

52 Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The First White President," *The Atlantic*, October 2017, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/10/the-first-white-president-ta-nehisi-coates/537909/; Marc Lamont Hill, *Nobody: Casualties of America's War on the Vulnerable, from Ferguson to Flint and Beyond* (New York: Atria Books, 2016).

53 An important contribution to this evolution of the post-racial argument is made by Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument: DuBois and the Illusion of Race," *Critical Quarterly* 12.1 (1985): 21–37.

54 Mitchell, *Seeing Through Race*, 13.

55 Ben Myers, "Where are the Minority Professors?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 14, 2016, www.chronicle.com/interactives/where-are-the-minority-professors. Similar results were reported in 2019; see Colleen Flaherty, "Professors Still More Likely Than Students to be White," *Inside Higher Ed*, August 1, 2019, www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2019/08/01/professors-still-more-likely-students-be-white.

56 I am grateful for the information shared with me by the Executive Office of the SAA on May 13, 2020.

57 "Black Like Me, Past Present, and Future: Behind the Stratford Festival Curtain," June 6, 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJK85IRtzYM.

58 Keith Hamilton Cobb, *American Moor* (New York: Methuen, 2020).

59 AnnLouise Keating, "Interrogating 'Whiteness,' (De)constructing 'Race,'" *College English* 57.8 (1995): 901–918 (902).

60 Timothy Barnett, "Reading 'Whiteness' in English Studies," *College English* 63.1 (2000): 9–37 (10).

61 The phrase comes from Sharon Stockton, "'Blacks vs. Browns': Questioning the White Ground," *College English* 57.2 (1995): 166–181.

62 On systemic racism, a related concept to what I term systemic whiteness, see Joe R. Feagin, *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, and Reparations*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2019), 1–34.

63 On the issue of decoloniality, see Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), esp. 1–2.

64 On colonial education and its racial discrepancies, see J. Edward Chamberlin, *Come Back to Me My Language: Poetry and the West Indies* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 73, see also 73–82; and see Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin, eds., *Post-Colonial Shakespeares* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

65 I can mention only a handful of classic and recent texts among a constantly expanding archive of criticism: W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) (New York: Penguin, 2018); Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967); bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Charles

W. Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

66 Urvashi Chakravarty, "The Renaissance of Race and the Future of Early Modern Race Studies," Special Issue: The State of Renaissance Studies II, *English Literary Renaissance* 50.1 (2019): 17–24; and Jean E. Howard, "Renaissance Studies in a Different Time," 70–75, in the same special issue. Howard, however, sets her assessment poignantly within the larger frame of the administrative contraction that besets the profession and strategies to ensure the survival of early modern studies more broadly.

67 Among the most recent publications since 2016 covering diverse topics and approaches, see Espinosa and Ruiter, *Shakespeare and Immigration*; Chapman, *Anti-Black Racism in Early Modern English Drama*; Akhimie, *Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference*; MacDonald, *Shakespearean Adaptation*; Thompson, *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race*; Catherine E. Fletcher, *The Black Prince of Florence: The Spectacular Life and Treacherous World of Alessandro de' Medici* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Delia Jarrett-Macauley, ed., *Shakespeare, Race, and Performance: The Diverse Bard* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Cassander L. Smith, Nicholas R. Jones, and Miles P. Grier, eds., *Early Modern Black Diaspora Studies: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Palgrave, 2018); Cord J. Whitaker, *Black Metaphors: How Modern Racism Emerged from Medieval Race-Thinking* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019); and Ruben Espinosa, *Shakespeare and the Shades of Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2021). Still others locate Shakespeare and race in larger discursive contexts; see, for example, Dennis Austin Britton and Melissa Walter, eds., *Rethinking Shakespeare Source Study* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

68 Erickson and Hall, "A New Scholarly Song," 7.

69 One should recall, however, the work on cosmetics and racial whiteness in the early modern period as presented by Kimberly Poitevin, "Inventing Whiteness: Cosmetics, Race, and Women in Early Modern England," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 11.1 (2011): 59–89. See also Arthur Little Jr., ed., *White People in Shakespeare* (New York: Palgrave, 2022).

70 Monica McDermott and Frank L. Samson, "White Racial and Ethnic Identity in the United States," *Annual Reviews in Sociology* 31(2005): 245–261 (246).

71 David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991); Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 2 vols (New York: Verso, 1994 and 1997); Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997); and Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). Subsequent important contributions include Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: Norton, 2010); Michael Monahan, *The Creolizing Subject: Race, Reason, and the Politics of*

Purity (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011); Veronica T. Watson, *The Souls of White Folk: African American Writers Theorize Whiteness* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013); George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006). See also Doane, "Rethinking Whiteness Studies," which provides an informed historical overview of the growth and emergence of the field along with an assessment of its theoretical protocols.

72 Margaret L. Andersen, "Whitewashing Race: A Critical Perspective on Whiteness," in *Whiteout: The Continuing Significance of Racism*, ed. Ashley W. Doane and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (New York: Routledge, 2003), 21; the twentieth anniversary edition of Richard Dyer, *White* (1997) (New York: Routledge, 2017); Peter Kolchin, "Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America," *The Journal of American History* 89.1 (2002): 154–173; and Valerie Babb, *Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Ruth Frankenberg, *White Woman, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Stephen Middleton, David R. Roediger, and Donald M. Shaffer, eds., *The Construction of Whiteness: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Race Formation and the Meaning of a White Identity* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016); Linda Martin Alcoff, *The Future of Whiteness* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

73 Robert P. Baird, "The Invention of Whiteness: The Long History of a Very Dangerous Idea," *The Guardian*, April 20, 2021, www.theguardian.com/news/2021/apr/20/the-invention-of-whiteness-long-history-dangerous-idea.

74 Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, 13.

75 Arthur Little Jr.'s focus on nostalgic critics yearning for a race-free past, who maintain that whiteness "claims for itself a racial exceptionalism even as it does racial work," bears some broad relevance to my arguments while making a strong case for a whiteness studies critique; see his "Re-Historicizing Race, White Melancholia, and Shakespearean Property," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 67.1 (2016): 84–103, esp. 95.

76 Margaret Talbot, "Getting Credit for Being White," *The New York Times Magazine*, November 20, 1997.

77 Quoted in Ibid.

78 Coates, "The First White President."

79 Baird, "The Invention of Whiteness."

80 Simon Clarke and Steve Garner, *White Identities: A Critical Sociological Approach* (New York: Pluto Press, 2010), 1.

81 For a vigorous defense of identity politics, acknowledging the productive intersection between embodied, lived experience and the knowledge produced, see Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 6–7.

82 Eric D. Knowles and Christopher K. Marshburn, "Understanding White Identity Politics Will Be Crucial to Diversity Science," *Psychological Inquiry*

21 (2010): 134–139 (135). The authors note that the current numerical advantage will contract to a plurality by 2042, according to the US Census Bureau.

83 Knowles and Marshburn, "Understanding White Identity Politics Will Be Crucial," 134.

84 bell hooks, *Black Looks*, 20.

85 Michael Eric Dyson, foreword to *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* by Robin DiAngelo (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), x.

86 DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, xiv.

87 For a comparison to the function "queer," see David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), esp. 62; and Melissa E. Sanchez, *Shakespeare and Queer Theory* (New York: Arden Shakespeare, 2019).