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“Not a Moor exactly”: Shakespeare, *Serial*, and Modern Constructions of Race

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S SCHOLARS OF RENAISSANCE LITERATURE AGREE, early moderns constructed alterity in inconsistent and varied ways. Shakespeare’s dramas, for example, exemplify that the early moderns established otherness through skin color (“Aaron will have his soul black like his face” [*Titus Andronicus*, 3.1.204]); foreign locale (“This damned witch Sycorax [...] from Algiers, / Thou know’st, was banished” [*The Tempest*, 1.2.263–66]); exoticism (“A lovely boy stolen from an Indian king. / She never had so sweet a changeling” [*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 2.1.22–23]); religion (“He tells me flatly there’s no mercy for me in heaven because I am a Jew’s daughter” [*The Merchant of Venice*, 3.5.28–29]); and associations with the subhuman (“an old black ram / Is tup-ping your white ewe” [*Othello*, 1.1.86–87]), to name just a few strategies.¹ Delineating and reifying alterity was a fluid process indeed.

This critical consensus regarding the fluidity of early modern constructions of otherness has produced a dichotomy between “then” and “now” with which early modern race scholars must grapple. But it also challenges all scholars and teachers of Shakespeare who engage with race in the classroom—if we concede we can talk about “race” at all. The case for this dichotomy is well known. Some scholars view the use of the term “race” in relation to the Renaissance as anachronistic because “race” did not signify for early moderns as it does for us today. “Race,” they explain, was a term connected to family and lineage instead

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¹ All Shakespeare quotations are taken from *The Norton Shakespeare*, gen. ed. Stephen Greenblatt, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2016).

of to foreign otherness exclusively. Furthermore, the early modern definition of difference varied, in contrast to the more constant, scientific, and biological categorization with which we define race today. As such, in Renaissance England, people saw religion, familial ties, and bloodlines as more important signifiers of othered identity than bodily markers such as skin color.² It was not until the mid- to late- seventeenth century, the argument goes, that scientific conceptions of racial

difference emerged and, with them, a focus on phenotypes as markers of that difference.

Yet those invested in early modern race studies vehemently counter these assertions and the historical division that underlies them. They claim that we can and should use the term “race” when discussing early modern conceptions of otherness. Part of this response rests on the argument that even today understandings of race easily shift since we base them on factors such as language, phenotypes, filial ties, and religion. For example, Kim F. Hall contends, “Race was then (as it is now) a social construct that is fundamentally more about

² As early as *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1995), Kim F. Hall addresses the “contemporary disagreement about the very existence of ‘races’ and therefore the viability of ‘race’ as a term in cultural or literary studies” (6). In *Shakespeare Jungle Fever: National-Imperial Re-Visions of Race, Rape, and Sacrifice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2000), Arthur L. Little Jr. observes, “It is worth noting from the outset that ‘race’ in the early modern era . . . works less as a stable identity category than as a semiotic field, one as infinitely varying as the cultural discourse constituting what we have come to identify as the early modern era or the Renaissance” (1). Sujata Iyengar’s *Shades of Difference: Mythologies of Skin Color in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2005) clarifies that her discussion about “‘race,’ embodiment, and skin color” “resist[s] the imposition of a straightforward historical trajectory ‘toward’ racialism or ‘toward’ color-prejudice” (1). Editors Ania Loomba and Jonathan Burton articulate the debate in the introduction to their sourcebook *Race and Early Modern England: A Documentary Companion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), explaining “The place of the Renaissance (and particularly the English experience) in these histories [of race] is especially contentious. On the one hand, the question of race has in recent years become central to early modern studies. . . . On the other hand, most theorists and historians of race still tend to exclude the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries from extended consideration. Often, they invoke premodern times only as a foil for later, more ‘racialized’ periods. Many early modernists concur, arguing that to speak of ‘race’ in the early modern period is to perpetuate an anachronism” (1, 2). Lara Bovilsky more succinctly notes in *Barbarous Play: Race on the English Renaissance Stage* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2008), “Most frequently, definitions root race and racism primarily in biology, in phenotype, and in the fixity of racial identity” (9). Ian Smith likewise engages with the debate in *Race and Rhetoric in the Renaissance: Barbarian Errors* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), observing “The broad consensus . . . has been that race, defined as the social and political outcome of an admittedly flawed biological enterprise and imperial self-interest, simply did not exist before the eighteenth century. To admit any other reading, especially in the English case, is, quite simply, to commit gross error” (11). And perhaps most succinctly, in *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race, and Contemporary America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011), Ayanna Thompson notes, “There are still skeptics who argue that it is anachronistic to analyze depictions and constructions of race in Renaissance texts” (5).

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power and culture than about biological difference.”³ Arthur L. Little Jr. concurs, “We come up short, I would argue, when we fantasize that our contemporary constructions of race—through our well-honed technologies of racism— offer us proof of a real racial ontology more truly

embedded in individual subjects than arbitrarily embodied in and across an infinite number of our cultural discourses.”⁴ And more recently, Ania Loomba and Jonathan Burton warn, “It is important to remember that even when racial ideologies and racist practices became more entrenched and pernicious, there was no singular approach to or agreement about human difference.”⁵ These early modern race scholars assert, moreover, that everyday conceptions of race are not necessarily grounded in scientific fact. At the same time, they push back against strict historical time-lines, arguing that scientific understandings of race developed in the Renaissance.⁶ In this essay, I join the early modern race scholars who continue to point out the falsity of asserting that modern constructions of race are somehow more stable and emphatically biological than early modern ones.⁷

In the quest for responsible historical contextualization of early modern race studies, Renaissance scholars have vigilantly attended to the differences between Renaissance culture and our own. Specifically, we guard against imposing contem-

³ Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1995), 6.

⁴ Arthur L. Little Jr., *Shakespeare Jungle Fever: National-Imperial Re-visions of Race, Rape, and Sacrifice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2000), 1.

⁵ Ania Loomba and Jonathan Burton, *Race in Early Modern England: A Documentary Companion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 7.

⁶ Other scholarly voices likewise challenge the dichotomy asserted between the early modern and the modern in regard to constructions of race. Smith, for example, insists, “‘Race’ is less a unitary identity than a relationship predicated on difference in privilege, power, and perceived agency that reinforces a distinct status for an authorized subject; as such, terminological obsession obscures race’s strategic, opportunistic, negotiating purpose” (*Race and Rhetoric*, 12). Thompson also stresses, “Race likewise has multiple, and at times contradictory, uses in contemporary American discourse. . . . there are times when race is also used to signify a set of cultural practices, such as specific ways of speaking, cooking, eating, and socializing and the historical narratives created that relate to these cultural practices. And there are also times when race is used to denote only nonwhite people, as if white Americans have no race” (*Passing Strange*, 4). See n. 2.

⁷ One would expect that these contestations that emerged nearly twenty years ago would be resolved. Yet the 2013 SAA meeting (Toronto) demonstrated that the debate about race in the Renaissance continues. Across multiple sessions devoted to the topic, the same stances arose. Some scholars pointedly asserted that race did not exist in early modern England. Moreover, they stressed that the topic should not be discussed in the classroom for fear of confusing students. Others vehemently countered, arguing—most heatedly during a time for follow-up questions—that early modern conceptions of race were no more or less fluid than constructions of race today. Furthermore, these scholars stressed that we need to more forcefully consider the formation of race in early modern literature, in both our scholarship and our pedagogy.

porary views on early moderns, particularly regarding the privileging of phenotypes—especially blackness—as markers of racial difference.⁸ Yet expanding the discussion beyond phenotypes has depended on the specious assertion that somehow early moderns conceived of race in a more protean way than we do today.

Although we may acknowledge that race is a construction, skeptical critics maintain that its privileged modern construction is predominantly scientific, phenotypical, and more stable than that of the past’s. By doing so, however, they enact a different methodological pitfall—imposing an assumed set of views about race upon moderns. This approach blinds us to the reality of our own racial discourses, which, I suggest, depend on and perpetuate an understanding of race no less fluid than the racial discourses of early modernity. Thus here I want to briefly turn to current race and ethnic studies and more extensively to a contemporary cultural example—the hit podcast *Serial*—to demonstrate that myriad issues, such as language, religion, appearance, and descent, often play pivotal roles in modern constructions of race. By recognizing this multiplicity, we can more effectively use the nuances of early modern writing on race to help us uncover the complexities of contemporary racial ideology. And just as significantly, we can employ our current conversations about racial identity as a fresh way of reconsidering canonical Renaissance texts.

Season 1 of *Serial*, which follows the story of Adnan Syed, a Pakistani American, Muslim teenager convicted of murdering his Korean girlfriend Hae Min Lee in 1999, proves a particularly intriguing study due to its Shakespearean connections—namely, its invocation of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello* as touchstones in its opening minutes and the increasing attention it has garnered as a possible replacement for Shakespeare in the English classroom.⁹ A highly

⁸ Various scholars have pushed back against skepticism concerning the link between black skin and otherness in Renaissance England. See especially Hall, *Things of Darkness*; Iyengar, *Shades of Difference*; and Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Performing Blackness on English Stages, 1500–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005). ⁹ Numerous media and online commentators laud *Serial* as a podcasting phenomenon. *Serial* is a spinoff of *This American Life*. A twelve-episode podcast, season 1 of *Serial* began on 3 October 2014 with a new episode released weekly until 18 December 2014. As Ernesto Londoño observes, season 1 is widely noted for being the most downloaded podcast on iTunes, “with roughly 5.7 million listeners per episode.” He contextualizes this number: “By comparison, the average download rate for the next 20 most popular podcasts is 446,000 per episode, according to Mark McCrery, the head of Podtrac, which monitors podcast traffic.” Lauren Davidson reports that “it has now been downloaded or streamed more than 68 m[illion] times....” Part of *Serial*’s popularity comes from its unique podcasting format. As Dan Fitchette explains, “Podcasts tend to be episodic, focused on thematic rather than a narrative exploration. Because it’s structured as a multi-part narrative, ‘Serial’ is a real departure.” Despite skepticism, host and journalist Sarah Koenig maintains that she did not craft an overarching narrative before she created *Serial* but rather asserts that she developed one based on real-time investigation. In a 30 October 2014 interview with Rachel Syme at *Vulture*,

dramatic, weekly podcast developed by journalist and host Sarah Koenig, the first season of *Serial* followed Syed's case.¹⁰ Ultimately, Syed was charged with Lee's murder and, after two trials, was found guilty. He is currently serving a life sentence. Each week, Koenig delved into a different aspect of the murder case, thereby creating a serialized narrative (as the title suggests). As Koenig herself and numerous online commentators assert, the story she followed unfolds like a "Shakespearean" tragedy—Syed hires a famous yet ultimately incompetent defense attorney; the state's star witness proves compromised due to his state-paid lawyer; a first trial favoring the defendant ends in a mistrial after a confrontation between the judge and the defense attorney taints a juror's perception. Of most interest here, however, is the way in which the voices in the podcast and the voices of the educated persons who analyze it online demonstrate that even today the term "race" often references much more than the biological. In the podcast as in *Othello*, otherness becomes a matter of difference due to a complex set of issues including appearance, locale, and lineage. As such, *Serial* exemplifies the fallacy of affirming stable modern racial discourses and positioning them as fundamentally different in kind than those invoked by early moderns. By letting go of this false dichotomy, we also let go of the impetus to whitewash the presence of racialization in great works of the Western literary canon, Shakespeare's among them.¹¹ Moreover, by admitting the fluidity of

episode 6, "I'm not that far ahead of you. Episode Five just aired, and I just did a first draft of Episode Six this afternoon, so I am pretty much creating this thing in real time now." She reaffirms, "I am releasing my work as I go." See Ernesto Londoño, "Hooked on the Freewheeling Podcast 'Serial,'" *New York Times*, 12 February 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/13/opinion/hooked-on-the-freewheeling-podcast-serial.html?_r=0; Lauren

Davidson, "How *Serial* shook up the podcasting industry," *Telegraph*, 3 April 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/mediatechnologyandtelecoms/11513025/How-Serial-shook-up-the-podcasting-industry.html>;

Dan Fichette, "5 Reasons Everyone's Obsessed with 'Serial,'" *Vulture*, 6 November 2014, <http://www.vulture.com/2014/11/serial-podcast-why-is-everyone-obsessed.html>; and Rachel Syme, "Talking to 'Serial's Sarah Koenig about Her Hit Podcast and Whether There Will Ever Be an Answer," *Vulture*, 30 October 2014, <http://www.vulture.com/2014/10/serials-sarah-koenig-on-her-hit-podcast.html>.¹⁰ During an interview with

Josephine Yurcaba, Koenig explains how she came to follow the case of Hae Min Lee's murder: "I learned about Adnan's story well before we came up with the show. A friend of the Syed family, Rabia Chaudry, came to me because I had been at the *Baltimore Sun* and had written about this attorney who had been disbarred—the same lawyer who represented Adnan. The notion was that his defense had screwed up the case, and would I look into this?" See Josephine Yurcaba, "This American Crime: Sarah Koenig on Her Hit Podcast 'Serial,'" *Rolling Stone*, 24 October 2014, <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/sarah-koenig-on-serial-20141024>.

¹¹ In his discussion of Jews in England in *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996), James Shapiro explains that at stake in the debate about their presence in the Renaissance is "whether Jews should be

recognized as belonging to England's past" (62–63). Here, what is at stake is whether race and racism are likewise part of England's past.

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modern constructions of race, we enable pedagogical discussions that make Shakespeare's works (and those of other early modern writers) especially relevant and engaging to students who are increasingly multiracial, as well as increasingly skeptical about the value and pertinence of classic literature.

In many ways, it may seem questionable for scholars of early modern race to turn to discussions held in current race, ethnic, and/or postcolonial studies given these fields' emphases on modern, sometimes nationally specific, constructions of race. Yet these disciplines demonstrate that, by and large, contemporary constructions of race prove to be unstable and based on factors other than biology. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic state, "A third theme of critical race theory, the 'social construction' thesis, holds that race and races are products of social thought and relations. Not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality; rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient."¹² Similarly, David Theo Goldberg and John Solomos observe, "Race and ethnic groups, like nations, are now quite widely considered to be 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1991), socially conceived and considered, manufactured and inflected group formations. . . . They are discursively fashioned or ideologically produced, made and changed in relation to, and molded by, social conditions, relations, clashes, and struggles."¹³ Michael Banton concurs when he asserts, "There is now general agreement that when in English-speaking countries reference is made to *race* . . . the reference is to race as a *social construct* and not a biological category."¹⁴ And explicitly invoking the language used to characterize the early modern, Steve Martinot argues that conceptions of race change over time by depending on various symbols that signal difference: "The important element of this racialization process is the *fluidity* of its symbolization. Indeed, that *fluidity* dispenses with the need to refer to anything real once it has served to socially and hierarchically categorize."¹⁵ These are only a few examples from significant scholarly voices exploring contemporary constructions of race. Yet they demonstrate that current understandings of race do not focus on biology as their singular or even predominant defining construct, and they are not any less protean than early modern racial conceptions.

¹² Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, eds., introduction to *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: New York UP, 2012), 1–18, esp. 8.

¹³ David Theo Goldberg and John Solomos, eds., general introduction to *A Companion to Racial and Ethnic Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 1–12, esp. 3.

¹⁴ Michael Banton, "Race Relations," in *Companion to Racial and Ethnic Studies*, ed. Goldberg and Solomos, 90–96, esp. 94.

¹⁵ Steve Martinot, *The Machinery of Whiteness: Studies in the Structure of Racialization* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2010), 19 (emphasis added).

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THE STRANGER FROM “OVER THERE”: CONSTRUCTIONS OF RACE IN SERIAL

The way we consider race in today’s society not only affects how we conceive of identity—whether our own or others’—but it also shapes how we tackle Shakespeare and race. Take, for example, a reference to Shakespeare made by Koenig in season 1 of *Serial* as she frames the podcast’s purpose: a retrospective reconstruction of the case and a reconsideration of the question of Syed’s guilt. In the podcast’s first episode, she invokes Shakespeare’s tragedies as a means of providing context for and cultural weight to her project: “And on paper, the case was like a Shakespearean mashup—young lovers from different worlds thwarting their families, secret assignments, jealousy, suspicion, and honor besmirched, the villain not a Moor exactly, but a Muslim all the same, and a final act of murderous revenge. And the main stage? A regular old high school across the street from a 7-Eleven.”¹⁶ Koenig does not directly reference the two plays that comprise the “mashup,” assuming an NPR audience, which is educated and thus likely middle-class. The listener must construct the Shakespeare association through context. “Young lovers from different worlds thwarting their families” points to *Romeo and Juliet*, but “jealousy, suspicion, and honor besmirched” and the “Moor” as the story’s “villain” invoke *Othello*.¹⁷ The latter Shakespeare connection is made all the more compelling because *Othello* was found in Lee’s backpack after her death. Koenig attempts to engage with *Othello* responsibly, making it clear that Syed is “not a Moor exactly.” With this qualifier, she cursorily acknowledges the distinction between Syed and Shakespeare’s tragic Other. Yet she constructs a supposedly relevant link by insisting on a shared Muslim identity for Syed and Othello. She does so first by the qualifier, “not a Moor exactly.” Even as she tries to acknowledge a distinction between Syed and Othello, her use of “exactly” plants the suggestion that Syed *could almost be a*

¹⁶ “Episode 1: The Alibi,” narrated by Sarah Koenig, *Serial*, podcast, 3 October 2014, <https://serialpodcast.org/season-one>. The producers of *Serial* do not provide transcripts for the podcast, even upon request. The FAQ on the *Serial* website insists that *Serial* is meant to be heard not read, but people are free to look at online transcripts created by listeners. For this essay, I began by transcribing podcast episodes myself. I then cross-referenced my transcription with those posted online. Ultimately, all quotations from *Serial* are based on my own transcription. The exception, however, is for episode 1. The website for *This American Life* provides an authorized transcript for only this episode, which I have used as a cross-reference. See “537: The Alibi Transcript,” *This American Life*, <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/537/transcript> (accessed 15 April 2016).

¹⁷ This allusion to Shakespeare works in the broader understanding of the term used by Peter Erickson in *Citing Shakespeare: The Reinterpretation of Race in Contemporary Literature and Art* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) in that it “[evokes] Shakespeare’s aura without using any of his words” (1). It is also worth noting that Koenig employs *Othello* as one of her two Shakespeare touchstones, a play whose titular figure Erickson calls

“Shakespeare’s state ser- vant” who “seems to promise convenient world-wide access” (x).

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Moor, that he somehow falls just shy of that distinction. She then claims that both Syed and Othello are “Muslim all the same.”

The problem is that Othello is not, in fact, Muslim. Koenig, however, wants the listener to create an association between race and religion through Othello that transfers onto Syed because it lends gravitas to her subject.¹⁸ Examples such as these make it clear that Shakespeare continues to serve as a touchstone for exploring the nature of human beings, including issues of race. Furthermore, Koenig’s reference to *Othello*—though incorrect—may be ultimately apt, for as in Shakespeare’s tragedy, *Serial* suggests that questions of descent, racial stereo- types, and the threat of religious difference collide in ways that appear more early modern than modern, varied and shifting rather than static and biological. As such, *Serial* works as a helpful case study for recognizing that modern concep- tions of race may be more “early modern” than skeptical scholars acknowledge.¹⁹

¹⁸ As Erickson notes, allusions to Shakespeare are often used for the purpose “of exhibiting one’s credentials” (*Citing Shakespeare*, 63). Furthermore, *Othello* may appeal to Koenig due to its focus on an interracial relationship. Across episodes, both Koenig and those she interviews stress the cultural, ethnic, and perceived racial differences between Lee and Syed. *Othello* would thus be the most apt Shakespeare correspondence. For a discussion of the dynamics of the interracial relationship in *Othello* and appropriations of this relationship, see Celia R. Daileader, *Racism, Misogyny, and the “Othello” Myth: Inter-racial Couples from Shakespeare to Spike Lee* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005).

¹⁹ The podcast’s depiction of race has elicited significant online debate. Several cultural crit- ics attack Koenig’s characterization of the story’s central figures: Lee, Syed, and Jay Wilds, Syed’s African American friend and seeming accomplice who testified against Syed at both of Syed’s trials. These critics point out that all three of these individuals, as well as almost all of the secondary people in this narrative, are Other in relation to white reporter Koenig. As such, their depiction has sparked a significant dialogue about Koenig’s white reporter privilege. Worth noting in this discussion are the various voices on either side of the debate that draw focus to the predominantly white makeup of American media. For further discussion of race in *Serial*, especially as it concerns Koenig’s white reporter privilege, see the following online articles: Conor Friedersdorf, “The Backlash Against *Serial*—and Why It’s Wrong,” *The Atlantic*, 3 December 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/12/unpacking-the-social-justice-critique-of-serial/383071/>; Jaime Green, “The Problem with the Problems with *Serial*” *JamieGreen.net*, 16 November 2014, <http://jaimegreen.net/post/102812521331/the- problem-with-the-problems-with-serial>; Julia Carrie Wong, “The Problem with ‘Serial’ and the Model Minority Myth,” *Buzzfeed*, 16 November 2014, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/juliacarriew/ the-problem-with-serial-and-the-model-minority-myth#.lpXgWk8NR>; Anna Silman, “From ‘the greatest podcast ever made’ to ‘shamelessly exploitative’: A Guide to the ‘Serial’ Backlash,” *Salon*, 17 November 2014, http://www.salon.com/2014/11/17/from_the_greatest_podcast_ever_made_to_shamelessly_exploitative_an_introduction_to_the_serial_backlash/; Lindsay Beyerstein, “Not

Problematic: In Defense of ‘Serial,’” *New York Observer*, 18 November 2014, <http://observer.com/2014/11/no-privilege-needed-in-defense-of-serial/>; Matt Collette, “To Download or Not to Download,” *Slate*, 20 November 2014, http://www.slate.com/blogs/schooled/2014/11/20/serial_replaces_shakespeare_in_one_california_english_class.html; Jeff Yang, “*Serial* Is Showing White People How to Talk about People of Color,” *Quartz*, 21 November 2014, <http://qz.com/300476/serial-can-actually-teach-white-people-how-to->

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That Syed’s Muslim, Pakistani American identity shapes the story exposes how, even in today’s American culture, religion, skin color, community, and other facets of identity comprise understandings of race. These intertwined factors appear most clearly in episode 10, entitled “The Best Defense is a Good Defense.”²⁰ This episode examines how Syed’s racial and religious identity may have influenced the case against him. Koenig explains that across the jury pool the judge “was on the lookout for prejudice, all kinds of prejudice. Against cops, against prosecutors, against Koreans, and against Muslims.” Koenig’s comment exposes the various identity politics at play in the case. Lee’s identity opens up prejudice against Koreans, a potential racial prejudice. Yet Koenig does not choose to say that the judge looks for prejudice against Pakistanis. Rather, she notes a possible religious prejudice “against Muslims.” By coupling race and religion, however, the potential for elision between ostensibly distinct categories of difference occurs.

In fact, as the segment continues, religious prejudice expressly becomes conflated with other issues, including race, as the shifting language employed by Koenig as well as by those involved in the case reveals. We learn that Koenig addresses questions of prejudice because Shamim Rahman, Syed’s mother, inspired her to consider the problem. Rahman explains that Syed’s family and their “whole [Muslim] community” believe Syed was arrested due to “discrimination,” elaborating “Because he was a Muslim child that’s why they took him. It was easy for them to take him, than the other people.” Rahman’s comment clearly indicates that in her opinion Syed’s Islamic faith positioned him as Other. Her use of the term “discrimination” rather than “racism” suggests that she sees a difference between religion (Syed as Muslim) and race (Syed as South Asian), identifying the former as the underlying motivation in her son’s arrest. In this way, Rahman’s logic aligns with an alleged modern understanding of race; if discriminating against the Other is not biological, it is also not, strictly speaking, racial. Yet the podcast quickly confuses any distinction between religion and race. Koenig clearly notes her skepticism concerning Rahman’s claim, saying she has a hard time believing “the notion that the cops and prosecutors in this case were driven by anti-Muslim feeling, by racism, and by racism alone.” Koenig’s extreme reduction of Rahman’s assertion (they are motivated “by racism alone”) aside, the way she frames the issue bears attention. In her estimation,

<http://www.scarymommy.com/club-mid/a-response-to-the-serial-podcast-and-its-white-privilege/>; and Sarah Miller, “A Response to the *Serial* Podcast and its White Privilege,” *Scary Mommy*, n. d., <http://www.scarymommy.com/club-mid/a-response-to-the-serial-podcast-and-its-white-privilege/>.²⁰ “Episode 10:

The Best Defense is a Good Defense,” narrated by Sarah Koenig, *Serial*, pod- cast, 4 December 2014, <https://serialpodcast.org/season-one/10/the-best-defense-is-a-good-defense>.

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anti-Muslim feeling equals racism. Her language exposes semantic and ideological elision. “Anti-Muslim” clearly refers to religious discrimination. Even so, Koenig immediately invokes racism although she does not mention any anti- South Asian or even anti-Pakistani sentiment. Her unspoken assumption may be the difficulty in separating Pakistani identity from Islamic belief. If that is the case, issues of descent and religion shape each other so fundamentally that they invite Koenig’s slippage. It seems, then, that everyday formulations of race do not solely depend on biology or phenotypes as their defining element, nor are they in any way stable.

This complex, shifting dynamic concerning modern racial construction directly challenges assertions made by early modern scholars skeptical about race. And the conflation between religion and various aspects of Syed’s otherness continues. Issues of dress and physical difference arise when one of Syed’s first lawyers, Chris Flohr, describes how during the bail hearing the courtroom was full of people from Syed’s religious and cultural community: “So, a lot of beards and a lot of traditional garb.” The jury certainly took note of Syed’s otherness, as Koenig’s interviews of various jury members reveal. The jury was comprised of seven African Americans, and Koenig does not mention any Muslim jury members. As such, we can safely surmise that for much of the jury, Syed truly was an Other, as their statements expose.²¹ Juror William Owens notes, “I don’t feel religion was why he did what he did. It may have been culture, but I don’t think it was religion. I’m not sure how the culture is over there, how they treat their women.” We can understand the capacious term “culture” here as roughly meaning, “The distinctive ideas, customs, social behaviour, products, or way of life of a particular nation, society, people, or period. Hence: a society or group characterized by such customs, etc.”²² Owens’s comment indicates he sees religion and culture as distinct. In fact, Owens’s statement about “how they treat their women” “over there” works as an Orientalizing gesture. It signals the stereotypical controlling, objectifying treatment of women by Asian men as exemplified, somewhat paradoxically, by the Oriental image of the impenetrable harem.²³ For Owens, Syed is likely a racial Other from a different

²¹ The podcast contains interviews with only two out of the twelve jurors, one likely Caucasian and the other of African American descent.

²² *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford UP, March 2016), <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/45746?rskey=ndkR7A&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed 9 April 2016), s. v. “culture, *n.*,” 7a. ²³ As Reina

Lewis reminds us, “In alternative and proto-feminist strands of Orientalism, the plight of the harem inmate could be invoked as a metaphor for women’s oppression.” Lewis attempts to provide alternative readings of this and other Orientalized images of women. See *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, Travel and the Ottoman Harem* (New York:

location when, in reality, the “over there” in which Syed resided would have been Owens’s own Baltimore.

Juror Stella Armstrong likewise notes the significance that Syed’s otherness played for the jury when she recalls, “They were trying to talk about in his cul- ture, and uh [in] Arabic culture, men rule, not women. I remember hearing that.”²⁴ Armstrong provides more specificity than Owens with the term “Arabic culture,” and she illuminates the ways that stereotyping influenced jury think- ing. Yet Armstrong’s statement also exposes how definitions of race, ethnicity, and culture collapse into one other.²⁵ As a Pakistani, Syed is not Arab. The jurors may have made the mistake due to Syed being Muslim, even though they said they were not taking religion into account. However, Arabs are not defined by religion but rather by culture, language, and genealogical descent. The jurors, however, did not take the time to carefully parse between religion (Muslim), ethnicity (Arab versus Pakistani), and race (potentially Caucasian versus Asian). Instead, they confused definitions because of prevalent stereotypes about Muslim men, all the while swearing that they did not consider religion. Thus, though none of them mentions race, their own persistence in disavowing religion as a factor suggests that something *like* race informed their conceptions of Syed.

Koenig certainly suggests so: “The jurors we spoke to said Adnan’s religion didn’t affect their view of the case. . . . But when we pressed them a little more, it seems stereotypes about Adnan’s culture were there, lurking in the back- ground.” This parsing proves revealing. For the jurors, religion and culture sup- posedly worked distinctly.²⁶ Yet because Syed was of Pakistani descent, they understood him as conforming to a “culture” they associated with “over there” even though Syed was, as Koenig pointedly reminds the listener, “American,

²⁴ Both Owens and Armstrong reference the stereotype that Deepa Kumar identifies in her chapter “The Persistence of Orientalist Myths” as “Myth Two: Islam Is a Uniquely Sexist Religion.” She explains that by the nineteenth century “the dominant narrative that emerged was one that presented Muslim women as severely subjugated, oppressed, and little more than slaves” (44). In Syed’s case, the jurors imagine that the Muslim male’s subjugation of women extends beyond the Muslim community to his Korean girlfriend. See *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012).

²⁵ Though I am using “race” and “ethnicity” as distinct terms, the former based on an assumed association with biology and the latter with culture, the two cannot always be easily distin- guished. For a helpful discussion of varying approaches toward these terms, see Werner Sollors, “Ethnicity and Race,” in *A Companion to Racial and Ethnic Studies*, ed. Goldberg and Solomos, 97–104.

²⁶ According to the prosecution, however, religion and culture played a significant role in that it provided motive. They argued that by dating Lee, Syed risked censure from his Muslim and Pakistani community. Thus, he felt

especially betrayed when she broke up with him to date another man. This murder, prosecutor Kevin Urick claimed in his opening statements, was a retaliation for “honor . . . besmirched” (*Serial*, episode 10).

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with Pakistani heritage.” In other words, he shared a culture with the jurors. Jury comments, however, indicate that some of them did not see Syed in this way. Such attitudes likely sparked Koenig’s use of the term “racism” to describe the emphasis on and prejudice concerning Syed’s alterity.²⁷ Koenig’s larger argument is that the confusion over Syed’s religion, descent, and culture “shows how easy it is to stir stereotypes in with facts, all of which then gets baked into a story.” That is precisely the point. Jurors, Koenig, and the listener may try to distinguish between religion, culture, and race, but these elements inform one another. As a result, we once again see that various facets of identity beyond biological descent constitute conceptions of the Other in a way that mirrors the fluid construction of race in early modern England.

For some scholars, it may be easy to say that race did not factor into Syed’s case but rather that culture or ethnicity informed the jurors’ views. But we must remember that Syed looked different than the majority of jury members determining his fate, whether white or black. The turbaned, bearded presence of his cultural community would only have heightened this distinction. Muslim lawyer Rabia Chaudry, Syed’s family friend and advocate, explains, “You have an urban jury in Baltimore city, mostly African American, maybe people who identify with Jay [the prosecution’s star witness against Syed] . . . more than Adnan, who is represented by a community in headscarves and men in beards. . . . The

²⁷ Positioning Syed’s culture as predominantly othered did not occur solely on an interpersonal level. During the police investigation, both when the case was considered a missing person case and later a homicide, a cultural specialist—who initially was hired by Lee’s uncle—assisted the investigation. This specialist worked for The Enehey Group. A report, entitled “Report on Islamic Thought and Culture with Emphasis on Pakistan. A Comparative Study Relevant to the Upcoming Trial of Adnan Syed,” created by the director of the group, was given to the Baltimore City Police. In it the director asserts, “Several basic components exist within the Islamic culture, regardless of where the ethnic Pakistani Islamic actually resides.” As applied to Syed, this would indicate that his Islamic culture would supersede his American cultural identification. Later in the document, in a section entitled “Summary as It Relates to Mr. Syed,” the director claims, “Given the social impact of growing up within the confines and rigid structure of Pakistani-Islamic society based in the United States, attending a public school . . . where all students are entitled to an education, freedom of speech and co-ed activities must have presented major divisions in cultural and sociological allegiances.” Yet as the report continues, it becomes clear that in the director’s estimation being Muslim would have exerted the larger influence upon Syed: “Clearly Mr. Syed faced almost insurmountable odds to meet with this ‘infidel or devil’ in secret. . . . For all intents and purpose [sic] he marked his territory by giving her a gift of great value within his culture [a scarf, which the report characterizes as a veil], and in doing so he sealed her fate with his. . . . To have later been let down by her relationship with another man would certainly [sic] been an

obvious violation of his culture, and a reason to destroy her.” Clearly, in this report, religion *is* culture, and the two categories cannot be separated from a Pakistani ethnicity, an ethnicity that trumps Syed’s American nationality and culture. See “Documents: Episode 6—The Suspect,” *Undisclosed*, podcast, <http://undisclosed-podcast.com/episodes/episode-6-the-suspect.html> (accessed 15 April 2016).

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visuals of the courtroom itself leaves an impression and there’s no escaping the racial implications there.”²⁸ Moreover, we must consider how the narrative constructed around Syed’s guilt, specifically his motives, became tethered to concerns and stereotypes about both South Asian and Muslim masculinity and culture.²⁹ For Koenig, and for many listeners, this narrative looks like an issue of race.

It may be easy to dismiss voices like those of the jurors because they represent a less informed perspective about distinctions between culture, religion, ethnicity, and race. Yet online discussions by more educated individuals likewise exemplify how “race” becomes a term readily applied to the complex construction of difference found in *Serial* season 1. Take, for example, an article entitled “*Serial* Episode 10: Did Racism Help Put Adnan in Prison?” in which four *Atlantic* staff members reflect on episode 10. In the piece, the language moves between religion, culture, ethnicity, and race as much as it does in the podcast.³⁰ Conor Friedersdorf notes that the episode takes on “anti-Muslim prejudice” as well as “stereotypes about Muslims,” but the stereotypes addressed were actually against Pakistanis, not Muslims. This may seem like parsing, as Pakistanis are overwhelmingly Muslim. But the prosecutor made a point to group Pakistani men as a type, not Muslims in general. Friedersdorf’s colleague Tanya Basu admits that for her, the most “thought provoking” part of the episode was the question of “what role, if any, did race play in Adnan’s trial?” Yet nowhere does Basu mention biology or South Asian descent. Instead, she discusses Syed’s Islamic faith and “Pakistani culture.” She also notes, “That Cristina Gutierrez [Syed’s defense attorney] must explain where Pakistan is, what an immigrant is, and how Adnan fits into that picture (he doesn’t) shows how much progress has yet to be made to reduce racial stereotyping within the American criminal justice system.” For Basu, prejudices about Syed’s Muslim religion and Pakistani culture can be collapsed easily into the category of racial stereotyping even though, narrowly defined, these are not racial categories. In the most notable critique of race in *Serial*—“White Reporter Privilege”—writer and author Jay Caspian Kang asserts that in episode 10 “Koenig quickly dispenses with Syed’s

²⁸ Jay Caspian Kang, “White Reporter Privilege,” *The Awl*, 13 November 2014, <http://www.theawl.com/2014/11/serial-and-white-reporter-privilege>.

²⁹ Prosecutors framed Lee’s murder as an angry retaliation by Syed—an extreme response to his perception of Lee as “besmirching” his honor by breaking up with him. This characterization taps into the stereotype identified by Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin of unfettered Islamic rage exemplified, in a political

context, by the “Islamic Rage Boy” (23). See *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation after 9/11* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2011).

³⁰ Conor Friedersdorf, Tanya Basu, Katie Kilkenny, and Lenika Cruz, “Serial Episode 10: Did Racism Help Put Adnan in Prison?,” *The Atlantic*, 4 December 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/12/serial-episode-10-cristinas-world/383432/>.

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race and religion.”³¹ But Kang is incorrect. Certainly, Koenig considers Syed’s religion when she discusses anti-Muslim bias, admittedly in an all too cursory way. However, Koenig does not dismiss Syed’s race because, technically, she never acknowledges the implications of his South Asian racial identity. In other words, she examines Syed’s religion but not his race. Yet for Kang, the discussion of the former suggests the latter. One finds a similar slippage in Soraya Roberts’s commentary in “Thoughts on Race, Journalism, and ‘Serial.’”³² Roberts claims, “In the case of *Serial* in particular, it isn’t even clear that this is a story about race. . . . While the prosecutors in the case painted him [Syed] as a devout Muslim who was enraged by how his relationship with Lee had led him to lie to his family, in the second episode of *Serial*, Koenig says that ‘Adnan claims he just wasn’t that religious.’ What to believe?” In the examples Roberts cites, she is correct; Syed’s Muslim identity is not a matter of race. And yet, as we have seen, conceptions of race and religion inextricably shape each other, both within the podcast and outside of it. As much as certain early modernists hold on to the idea of a neat, stable, scientific conceptualization of race today, these voices within and about *Serial*—informed, educated voices—suggest that modern conceptualizations of race may have more in common with early modern ones than these scholars have admitted.

SHAKESPEAREAN IMPLICATIONS: RECONSIDERING EARLY MODERN RACE STUDIES

But how can the depiction and discussion of race in *Serial* inform our engagement with Shakespeare? I contend that representations such as those in *Serial* encourage an ideological and methodological shift within the field. As a very current artifact produced and discussed by some of the most privileged and educated voices in American society, *Serial* demonstrates that today’s conceptions of race are no more stable or biologically based than those constructed in the early modern period. Acknowledging this correspondence allows those of us interested in early modern race studies to employ the contested term “race” with much less trepidation and defensiveness. Doing so mirrors the current methodological trends in race and ethnic studies, namely the recognition of race in the West’s historical past as well as the presence of *racisms*—varying constructions of race and racial prejudice—in the present.³³

³¹ Kang, “White Reporter Privilege.” ³² Soraya Roberts, “Thoughts on Race, Journalism, and ‘Serial,’” *Bitch Media*, 20 November 2014, <https://bitchmedia.org/post/thoughts-on-race-journalism-and-serial>.

³³ David Theo Goldberg explains that across critical race studies, understandings of racism are also changing: “The

presumption of a single monolithic racism is being displaced by a mapping of the multifarious historical formulations of *racisms*.” This displacement invites new

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This particular linkage between the early modern and the modern also allows us to grant that there may have been an ideology of race before a specific semantic articulation of it. Conceptions of alterity in the Renaissance do not *have* to be understood as race. But by recognizing the varied, contradictory ways people consider and conceive of race, we open up the possibility that these conceptions *can* be understood racially even if individual racial ideologies do not neatly align with strict definitions of the term. By doing so, we can identify and acknowledge the cultural legacy of racialized art.³⁴ Too often, it seems as if those hesitant to consider race in the Renaissance fear sullying great art. They are unnerved by the potential that works we love to teach and study, works on which we have built our careers, might be implicated in the prejudicial demarcation between “us” and “them.”³⁵ Whether we like it or not, there is a political and ideological potency attached to the terms “race” and “racism” not carried by the terms “bigotry” or “ethnocentrism.”³⁶ “Race” and “racism” indicate a hierarchical distinction based not on religion, gender, sexuality (though these can be interrelated), or even on culture but on an aspect of identity often imagined as indelible even as it is ironically and paradoxically conceived of in fluid

questions, including two that apply directly to early modern race studies: “In what ways does the language used in expressing racist attitudes and in making accusations and denials of racism alter through historical time?” and “What are the factors . . . cultural, literary, and so on—that effect such alternations in language, expression, and attitude?” See Goldberg, ed., introduction to *Anatomy of Racism* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990) xi–xxiii, esp. xiii, xii.

³⁴ Goldberg provides a helpful definition for “racialism”: “Racial conception, or what some . . . have called racialism, is the view that groups of people are marked by certain generalizable visible and heritable traits. These generalized traits may be physical or psychological, cultural or culturally inscribed on the body, and the physical and psychological, bodily and cultural traits are usually thought somehow indelibly connected.” See Goldberg, *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 4. Martinot explains that *racialization* refers “not to the social status of people (of different colors) that produces itself culturally in this society . . . but rather to what is done socially and culturally to people, for which personal derogation and alien status are part of the outcome” (*Machinery*, 10). As Hall clarifies in her own use of the term, it proves “useful because it suggests a way of talking about notions of human difference that have political and social effects and that are different from more institutionalized forms of racism” (*Things of Darkness*, 4n).

³⁵ Ian Smith reminds us, via Toni Morrison, that “we are subjected to and reproduce a dominant ‘white’ ideology that defines what we see and how we read.” We can take Smith’s claim even further by admitting that this white ideology likewise informs our methodologies and the topics we consider worthy of our scholarly attention.

See Smith, "Othello's Black Handkerchief," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 64.1 (2013): 1–25, esp. 25.

³⁶ The same can be said about using "ethnicity" rather than "race." Peter Erickson notes that "*Ethnicity* is an appealing possibility" compared to "the highly charged term race," but he then cautions, "In the shift from race to a more inclusive ethnicity, the specificity of black-white power relations is in danger of disappearing." See "The Moment of Race in Renaissance Studies," *Shakespeare Studies* 26 (1998): 27–36, esp. 30.

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ways.³⁷ If we accept both this contradiction and the ideological weight attached to the word "race," we understand that considering race in Renaissance literature is not simply about semantic correctness. Rather, locating race in canonical texts forces us to identify the long-standing and potentially transhistorical practices used to discriminate against those considered foreign Others, like Syed and Othello. More specifically, addressing early modern race pushes us to more fully understand great literature's role in disseminating the ideologies underpinning those discriminatory practices. By conceding race's presence even in the fluidity of early modern culture, we acknowledge that identifying race in great, foundational works of art—and in turn, combating racist ideology through our classrooms and research—is not as simple as pinpointing biologically based conceptions of otherness.

Recognizing race in Shakespeare's works proves particularly crucial. People of color can often feel as if Shakespeare's position as the apotheosis of elite, educated, white culture excludes them. As Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan point out, for African Americans this exclusion has come in the form of "the color bar" that "has often prevented African Americans who were born and raised in the United States from full participation in classical theater."³⁸ As a result, "many in the African American community remain ambivalent about Shakespeare and the cultural hierarchy he has come to represent." They likewise explain how this cultural alienation may be exacerbated for other persons of color: "The barriers seem even higher for America's newest immigrants—Latinos and Asian Americans—because Shakespeare is the premier poet of the English language and his vocabulary is more difficult to master than colloquial American speech. . . . As a result, for many Latino and Asian American artists Shakespeare has come to stand for Anglo-America's cultural hegemony."³⁹ If people who have been othered in American society already feel barred from engagement and identification with Shakespeare, refusing to consider race in relation to his texts may only exacerbate this alienation. For many persons of color, issues of race comprise daily life as they confront the realities of white privilege in America. By refusing to locate race in Shakespeare's work, we create

³⁷ As with most terms regarding difference, "racism" likewise has nuanced and divergent uses. Goldberg once again gives a useful definition: "Racism, in short, is about exclusion through depreciation, intrinsic or instrumental, timeless or time-bound. . . . Racism concerns the maintenance of homogeneities' contours, militarizing their borders, patrolling their places of possible transgression." See *Threat of Race*, 5.

³⁸ Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Shakespeare in America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), 122.

³⁹ Vaughan and Vaughan, *Shakespeare in America*, 122. Thompson provides an excellent example of the way language codes otherness in relation to Shakespeare when she discusses reviews of Peter Sellars's *Othello*; see *Passing Strange*, 169–81, esp. 174.

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one more way that American culture marginalizes their experiences. The blind-ers of white privilege that insist on a universal Shakespeare unsullied by the potential presence of racial prejudice discourage identification by those who may locate their experiences of racial difference in Shakespeare's canonical works.⁴⁰ Furthermore, if early modern studies ignores the presence of race in Renaissance literature, we may also be inadvertently entrenching white privilege by deterring scholars of color and scholars invested in race and social justice from work in our field. Ayanna Thompson argues that "if the field were to support the inclusion of race studies more systematically and consistently, then our ranks may diversify more rapidly and thoroughly."⁴¹ It stands to reason that if we continue to resist the integration of race studies with Renaissance studies, we may alienate scholars deeply invested in matters of social justice who might feel as if there is little space for their interests and research among those who study Shakespeare.

On a specifically pedagogical level, allowing for a discussion of race in Shakespeare facilitates important textual approaches in the classroom. Recently, a California high school teacher, Michael Godsey, replaced *Hamlet* with *Serial* in his tenth and eleventh grade English classes. Godsey argues in favor of the substitution by asserting that *Serial* allows him to teach the Common Core's anchor standards in reading and writing more easily "than anything written by Shakespeare, Joyce, or anybody else. By far."⁴² In fact, on his blog Godsey addresses all nine reading standards and explicitly details how teaching *Serial* allows him to convey them to his students. The larger appeal, however, is that according to Godsey students find *Serial* more engaging than Shakespeare: "They actually listen to the story."⁴³ In large part, this heightened attention comes from *Serial*'s apparent relevancy. Godsey explains, "Students find this [learning the standards] more exciting and relevant when using a contemporary story like 'Serial.'"

Godsey's experiment has garnered attention because his replacement of Shakespeare makes people uncomfortable. Matt Collette notes, "But Godsey's

⁴⁰ Thompson argues that race plays a key role in disrupting the framing of Shakespeare as universal: "As my students do on the first day of class, most people will assume that an avowal of Shakespeare's universality is universally applicable, encompassing, timeless, and, well, good. The tensions arise, however, when race enters into Shakespeare's universe." See *Passing Strange*, 41–42.

⁴¹ Thompson, *Passing Strange*, 180. ⁴² Michael Godsey, "I'm Replacing Shakespeare with 'Serial,'" *The Skeptical Pioneer*, 6 November 2014, <http://www.mrgodsey.com/2014/11/im-replacing-shakespeare-with-serial.html> (accessed 3 February 2015).

⁴³ Michael Godsey, “Standards Based ‘Serial,’” *The Skeptical Pioneer*, 6 November 2014, <http://www.mrgodsey.com/2014/11/standards-based-serial.html> (accessed 14 April 2016).

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students are no longer reading and studying the iconic language and plots of Shakespeare, which is definitely not something the Common Core pre- scribes.”⁴⁴ The use of the term “iconic” stands in for the cultural evaluation of Shakespeare as great art, a status not achieved by *Serial*. In other words, part of the issue is that, achievement of Common Core standards notwithstanding, popular culture has displaced Shakespeare’s great works. Collette cites Carol Jago, a member of the California Reading and Literature Project of UCLA and a participant of the “panel that oversaw” the instigation of the reading and writ- ing Common Core standards: “‘It’s hard not to come off as the cranky old English teacher who just likes Shakespeare,’ she admits. But Jago says there’s a reason we still teach these classic texts: They carry deep lessons about our shared humanity that have lasted for decades, even centuries.” By invoking shared humanity, Jago appeals to the popular idea of humanistic Shakespeare.⁴⁵ As Thompson reminds us, “Shakespeare is one of the few authors who is assumed to have written timeless and universal plays.”⁴⁶ By opening up space to discuss race in Shakespeare we provide ourselves with one more avenue to make Shakespeare all the more applicable for today’s students by addressing differ- ences and potential similarities across Western constructions of otherness.⁴⁷

Take, for example, the text invoked by Koenig herself—*Othello*. Asserting that race did not exist in the Renaissance means that race is not pertinent to this play. Students would likely (and rightly) meet such an assertion with skepti- cism. By acknowledging rather than resisting the overlap between early modern and modern constructions of race, one would be able to more logically employ varying pedagogical strategies. For example, teachers could request that stu- dents list the ways in which numerous characters identify Othello as Other. If not stymied by concerns about drawing false transhistorical connections due to strict definitions of race, they could then invite students to debate whether we construct race similarly today or not, and whether what we see in *Othello* is, in fact, a treatment of race. Thus, just as Godsey’s students discuss Syed’s guilt, students of Renaissance literature could contribute to the conversation about race and the Renaissance rather than simply being lectured on it.

⁴⁴ Matt Collette, “To Download.” See n. 19. ⁴⁵ L. Monique Pittman explains how positioning Shakespeare as the great humanist is deeply connected to establishing and invoking his authority; see *Authorizing Shakespeare on Film and Television: Gender, Class, and Ethnicity in Adaptation* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 1–18 and 57–76. ⁴⁶

Ayanna Thompson, “The Blackfaced Bard: Returning to Shakespeare or Leaving Him?,” *Shakespeare Bulletin* 27.3 (2009): 437–56, esp. 451.

⁴⁷ For further discussion of race, Renaissance literature, and pedagogy, see Kim F. Hall, “Beauty and the Beast of Whiteness: Teaching Race and Gender,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 47.4 (1996): 461–75.

By furthering a dialogue between the construction and depiction of race in the Renaissance and today, one could also more strategically and convincingly place *Othello* in conversation with contemporary racial issues, especially those that invite students to consider social justice. Francesca T. Royster asserts that “more than any other of Shakespeare’s plays, *Othello* demands a method of teaching that bridges the past with the present” because “in our culture, the story of *Othello* is often retold as a story of the black experience in white culture.”⁴⁸ Creating such a bridge would allow students to discuss *Othello* in relation to modern examples, from television shows to films to music to current events, such as the narrative of the criminal and/or violent black male informing the recent Michael Brown and Eric Garner cases. Students could thus bring their interests in contemporary racial dynamics to bear on Shakespeare’s canonical works, which would open up discussions about his universality and the politicization of his plays. Kim Newton, director of College Prep Programs for the American Shakespeare Center, suggests similar pedagogical strategies as a means for Shakespeare to “reach[] . . . students on a different level—a level that would engage them as much as *Serial* intrigued millions of attentive weekly listeners.”⁴⁹ For an in-class activity, Newton proposes the following discussion: “How do characters in *Othello* refer to Othello’s otherness? What sets Othello apart from the Venetians? Do the same descriptions apply to Adnan? In what ways are Othello and Adnan similar to and different from one another?”

Newton’s example, and my own, can certainly be used in the classroom even if one does not agree that we have created too stark a distinction between race as conceived in the Renaissance and race as conceived today. In fact, many scholars already approach *Othello* through the lens of race, while others take this connection a step further and make links to contemporary culture as outlined above.⁵⁰ Yet if this is the case, there is a potential paradigmatic and methodological disconnect. We cannot assert that race does not exist in the Renaissance and then use it as a context for exploring *Othello* and other early modern texts that consider otherness. In other words, without conceding the possibility that race in the Renaissance exists, these exercises and discussions carry little logical or methodological weight, for the worry will always be that

⁴⁸ Francesca T. Royster, “Rememorializing Othello: Teaching *Othello* and the Cultural Memory of Racism,” in *Approaches to Teaching Shakespeare’s “Othello,”* ed. Peter Erickson and Maurice Hunt (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2005), 53–61, esp. 53. ⁴⁹ Kim Newton, “Finding Shakespeare in ‘Serial,’” *ASC Education*, American Shakespeare Center, 23 January 2015, <https://asc-blogs.com/2015/01/23/finding-shakespeare-in-serial/>. ⁵⁰ For a helpful resource that presents various pedagogical approaches to *Othello*, including specific ones engaging with race, see *Approaches to Teaching Shakespeare’s “Othello,”* ed. Peter Erickson and Maurice Hunt.

students might be too careless; they might too easily conflate a fluid racial past with a stable racial present. By refusing a false delineation between race “then” and “now,” activities such as these make more methodological sense. We can then be more creative as we consider how to craft approaches that breathe new life into the classroom and that allow for coupling Shakespeare with questions of social justice. In other words, teachers can more logically invite expressly relevant discussions and allow innovative pairings, like smartly and responsibly connecting “iconic” Shakespeare with “hip” *Serial*. This rejection of the stark distinction between racial past and racial present cannot be one made only by those who self-identify as early modern race scholars, however. Instead, we need reconsideration by early modern and Shakespeare scholars as a whole so that the argument *for* race in the Renaissance can shift from the margins to the center. It should become the new status quo so we can move beyond this decades-old debate to more productive scholarly and pedagogical inquiries.

That is not to say that this approach means disregarding what proves distinctly early modern about Shakespeare’s texts and modern about current narratives. Newton’s comments serve as an excellent example. As she explains of her pairing of *Serial* with *Othello*, “The story of Hae Min Lee’s tragic death invokes the story of *Othello* more than any other [of Shakespeare’s stories]. Hae Min, like Desdemona, was a well-liked young woman who found herself in a controversial relationship with a man whom society deemed to be an outsider. Adnan and Othello are the exotic ‘other,’ accomplished and admired by their communities, yet doomed to suffer through their own tragic endings.” In some ways, Newton’s comment invokes Koenig’s opening to the podcast, a conflation of Syed with Othello as murderous Other. Yet Newton carefully notes not an interracial but rather a “controversial relationship” between Lee and Syed. Moreover, she does not identify Adnan and Othello as fellow Muslims. Instead, she correctly observes that they are both “deemed . . . the exotic other.” Newton’s use of “deemed” here is key, for she points to otherness as a construction, demonstrated just as potently by Iago as by the jurors of Syed’s trial. In other words, unlike Koenig, Newton chooses her language carefully. She thereby demonstrates that one can discuss otherness as present in the early modern and modern periods while still being thoughtful and accurate about ideological and semantic demarcations.

The examples provided above are in no way meant to be prescriptive. Rather, I include them as a means of illustrating what we gain if we carefully yet unhesitatingly consider race in the great works of early modernity, even if, especially if, doing so exposes discomfiting depictions of racial otherness in early modern culture. As *Serial* exemplifies (and numerous other artifacts as well as lived experience corroborate), even today descent, foreignness, skin color, culture, and

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religion all shape ideological constructions of the racial Other. If we accept this premise, as I believe we must, then we can likewise accept that the concept of race existed in the Renaissance and its culturally significant literature. By doing so, we pull ourselves out of the seeming impasse plaguing discussions about race in early modern texts. We also open up new yet still methodologically sound ways of making Shakespeare matter to students whose increasingly mixed-race descent makes them a generation especially grappling with questions of identity, race,

and otherness. Considering the possibility of race in Renaissance texts can only provoke better, more thoughtful engagements with “iconic” literary works as well as potentially related pop-cultural texts. Moreover, by tackling the difficult topic of race in the classroom, we also refine our students’ (and our own) understandings of how we define and deploy race both historically and today.

Of the eight reasons Godsey provides for replacing *Hamlet* with *Serial*, his fourth reads, “My students’ opinions might actually matter on social networking sites. Or in my class. Or in real life.”⁵¹ He continues, “Nobody on the Internet really cares about their thoughts on Hamlet’s suicidal tendencies.” If we take his premise to be true, discussing race in the Renaissance does not necessarily solve this problem because maybe no one will care what students think about race in *Othello* either. Yet by affording the opportunity to pair a discussion of *Othello*, or any other applicable early modern text, with a relevant debate about current American constructions of race and social justice, we make certain that our research on and pedagogy of Shakespeare does indeed matter in class and in “real life.”

⁵¹ Godsey, “Replacing Shakespeare.”