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Teaching *Othello* in the Schoolhouse Door: History, Hollywood, Heroes

Shakespeare for a Notebook, Stories for Facts

IN THE ANECDOTE THAT CONCLUDES *Shakespearean Negotiations*, Stephen Greenblatt tells a story told by "H. M. Stanley . . . in his account of his journeyings through what he calls 'the dark continent'" (161). Stanley, we are told, is challenged to burn his notebook by the Mowa people, who believed, rather accurately as it turns out, that the words inscribed there would bring waste to their country and people. Greenblatt quotes Stanley:

My tent was not fifty yards from the spot, but while going towards it my brain was busy in devising some plan to foil this superstitious madness. My note-book contained a vast number of valuable notes; plans of falls, creeks, villages, sketches of localities, ethnological and philological details, sufficient to fill two octavo volumes—everything was of general interest to the public. I could not sacrifice it to the childish caprice of savages. As I was rummaging my book box, I came across a volume of Shakespeare (Chandos edition), much worn and well thumbed, and which was of the same size as my field-book; its cover was similar also, and it might be passed for the note-book provided that no one remembered its appearance too well. I took it to them. (162)

Taking the bait and switch, not having examined the book very closely (since to touch it would be to risk contamination), the Mowa allowed the explorer to burn Shakespeare, thus preserving good relations all around. As Shakespeare burned, foiling and yet indulging their superstitious madness, their childish caprice, "something approaching to a cheer was shouted among them" (Stanley, cited by Greenblatt, 162).

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As he concludes his study of the circulation of social energy in Renaissance England, Greenblatt uses the anecdote about Stanley to emphasize two points. First is a point to which I will turn later in this essay: that, historically, the institutional “beneficiary” of Shakespeare’s achievement has been not the theater but “the institution of literature” or alternatively, the educational system (160). Second is to assert a relationship between social institutions: on the one hand, the theater and, on the other, certain others, unspecified but unified under the aegis of “power,” which surround it. That relationship is one of “unresolved and unresolvable doubleness” (158). Shakespeare is potentially both central and marginal to the discourses and the workings of power:

For if at moments we can convince ourselves that Shakespeare is the discourse of power, we should remind ourselves that there are usually other discourses—here the notes and vocabulary and maps—that are instrumentally far more important. Yet if we try then to convince ourselves that Shakespeare is marginal and untainted by power, we have Stanley’s story to remind us that without Shakespeare we wouldn’t have the notes. (163)

I apologize for quoting what are among the most cited lines in *Negotiations*, and for bringing up the problem of causality within a discussion of the anecdote, which Joel Fineman has defined as both “the literary form or genre that uniquely refers to the real” and “a *historeme*, i.e., . . . the smallest minimal unit of the historiographic fact” (56, 57). But the connection is germane. Note that in the lines quoted above, Greenblatt relies on qualifiers such as “usually” and “far more.” What goes unspecified here are the specific relationships between these various discourses: how and when, for example, are ethnographic field notes instrumentally more important to the workings of a certain kind of power than is a production of *The Tempest* or *Othello*—or, more importantly, vice-versa? To be sure, to ask such a question of new historicism is not new, but it is equally sure that as we enter the new millennium, literary criticism’s romance with overdetermination—itsself doubtless overdetermined—remains strong.

The turn from causality requires the privileging of certain

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kinds of evidence and rhetorical moves, including the anecdote. Fineman argues that the anecdote

uniquely *lets history happen* by virtue of the way it introduces an opening into the teleological, and therefore timeless, narration of beginning, middle, and end. The anecdote produces the effect of the real, the occurrence of contingency, by establishing an event as an event within and yet without the framing context of historical successivity. (61)

In Fineman's account, new historicism's anecdotal openings offer surprisingly small victories, a characterization Greenblatt seemingly approves: "the moments of openness are soon closed, but there is always the possibility, the promise, of other anecdotal openings" ("Introduction," xix). Francis Barker would agree but not approve: small victories is the price you pay when you substitute anecdotes for statistics, culture for society, and local knowledge for a "theory of the social whole" (199). Barker, most furious of all new historicism's critics, focuses his attack on the "culturalism" of new historicism, its tendency to de-realize power by transforming society into discourse. This tendency was underscored at the Symposium at the University of Alabama where Barker first read some of this work: "I was taken to task in the discussion which followed my lecture for allegedly valorizing the Real," that is, for parading, statistically, a decidedly non-culturalist form of power, the vast numbers of executions and prison deaths occurring annually in England during the Age of Shakespeare (202, n. 63).

This moment was extraordinary, if I may be anecdotal, one that issued in quite a bit of intellectual heat. Still, what Barker contests is not the nature of reality or texts, but the nature on the one hand of argument and evidence and, on the other, of our relationship to history: relying on "the smallest minimal unit of the historiographic fact" simply does not allow him to make the kinds of cultural analyses—or interventions—he thinks necessary. Of course, in an academic culture in which appearing to valorize the real can be cause for alarm and contestation, it probably should not surprise that history happens or that the preferred form of empirical evidence is *literary*, a form that *refers to the real* or is, in fact, the smallest minimal unit, etc. A gesture toward, a reference to, a minimal unit of fact is all the facts we need.

Stories for Facts, Shakespeare for a Notebook

And as it turns out, we do not need even that. Greenblatt concludes his discussion of Stanley's story by revealing that, as told in *Through the Dark Continent*, the story may not be true, indeed, likely is not true. The notebooks, presumably saved by the burning of Shakespeare, were lost for many years; their rediscovery and publication revealed only that the Mowa were angry with him, not that he burned the bard to save the notebooks. Perhaps, Greenblatt offers, Stanley made up the story as published in *Through the Dark Continent* "to heighten that general interest with which he was so concerned." And thinking in writerly terms, Greenblatt adds: "He could have achieved his narrative effect with only two books: Shakespeare and the Bible. And had he professed to burn the latter to save his notebook, his readers would no doubt have been scandalized" (163).

The story, then, of the burning of Shakespeare in the heart of darkness is (likely) a narrative effect, a rhetorical flourish, even no doubt a tool of late-nineteenth-century marketing. And while, in the context of Fineman and Barker, one may wonder precisely what reference to the real one is receiving in the story-telling going on at the end of *Negotiations*, Greenblatt insists that we consider it not so deeply: "for our purposes, it doesn't really matter very much if the story 'really' happened. What matters is the role Shakespeare plays in it" (165).

Brook Thomas suggests, quite rightly, that what interests Greenblatt here is "the iconic value of Shakespeare," a value that is enhanced if the story isn't true; a fictional account "would indicate Stanley's awareness of how the idea of burning Shakespeare's works would affect his audience" (189). Equally right is to suggest that what Greenblatt is doing is literary criticism, giving us his own brilliant reading of the story. What matters is the role Shakespeare plays in a story; and this is what Greenblatt means when he tells us that "for our purposes" it doesn't matter whether the story is true. Greenblatt proposes to explain the relation between the theater and the surrounding institutions, but what he gives is another reading of another story.

At this point, I wish to turn attention to the role Shakespeare plays—or might have played—in another story, a story that, according to several critics, rewrites or fictionalizes recent American history, Robert Zemeckis's film, *Forrest Gump* (1994). And *Gump* does so in ways impossible a generation ago:

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as in Woody Allen's earlier film, *Zelig* (1983), but more elaborately, fiction and non-fiction are here deliberately confused not merely on the story plane but in the manipulation of the filmic material itself. Computer-enhanced photography, clever editing, and (not-so-clever) dubbing make it possible for actor Tom Hanks to be inserted into already existing documentary footage and simultaneously create the impression that real historical persons have been brought into the fictional universe of *Forrest Gump*. (Anderegg, 43)

As with Zemeckis's more recent *Contact* (1997), which interpellated television reporters and even the President of the United States into the fictional narrative, this merging of fact and fiction (a charge, incidentally, that Maurice Charney brings against Greenblatt's *Negotiations* [289]) makes many critics very nervous, as in the case of Thomas B. Byers, who complains that *Gump* "is an aggressively conservative film—in fact a reactionary one"—because, although it evokes history and the lives of crucial figures in it, "the comedy of their eccentric connections to Forrest's life supplants and covers over their larger import" (421, 427).

In the movie, set for a while at the University of Alabama, Forrest—who is named after the founder of the Ku Klux Klan so as to remind him "that sometimes we all do things that, well, just don't make no sense"—finds himself watching segregationist George Wallace's stand in the schoolhouse door. This is the long-promised moment when Wallace, with one hand raised "like a traffic cop" or "like a bailiff swearing in an unruly witness," confronts Robert F. Kennedy's stand-in, Assistant Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach, who seeks to implement court-ordered enrollment at the University of two African-American students, James Hood and Vivian Malone (Clark, 225; Carter, 148). After Wallace's speeches and departure, the film cuts to a scene in which Hood and Malone are escorted through the schoolhouse door and into Foster Auditorium.

The film, though somewhat vague on this point, accurately does not suggest that Wallace met Hood and Malone that day. E. Culpepper Clark reports that "with Wallace's departure, Jimmy Hood and Vivian Malone entered the schoolhouse door to a spattering of applause" (231). Kennedy and Katzenbach had agreed that Katzenbach and other officials would face Wallace; the students were to wait in a car and thus avoid the possibility of being subjected to any indignity. But this decision was based

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not primarily on "Kennedy and Katzenbach's concern for the applicants," according to Dan T. Carter: "leaving Malone and Hood in the car, Kennedy later confided, 'permitted us not to charge him [Wallace] with contempt, because the students weren't [physically] there yet'" (147). Nevertheless, Carter concludes, "however appropriate this decision might have seemed at the time, it could not have been better scripted by Wallace. . . . the very notion of couching the confrontation as a constitutional issue was *precisely* in keeping with Wallace's strategy: an abstract struggle between 'states' rights' and the 'central government.' . . . the carefully constructed illusion that the issue had nothing to do with race" (148).

In the present context, it is necessary to underscore the theatrical nature of Wallace's stand, suggested in the above lines and noted by all the commentators I have read. Events in the previous nine months made the situation in Alabama explosive: James Meredith's attempt to enroll at the University of Mississippi in the fall of 1962 sparked a riot and left hundreds injured and two dead; George Wallace's inauguration as Governor of Alabama in January, 1963, served up a public insistence on "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever" as well as a promise to make a stand in the schoolhouse door to avoid—or at least protest—integration of the University; and demonstrations in Birmingham in April and May, 1963, resulted in Martin Luther King's jailing and his composition of the "Letter from the Birmingham City Jail," as well as Bull Connor's use of fire hoses and police dogs on schoolchildren. Hamstrung by fear of violence, the Kennedy administration "spent considerable time figuring some political calculus that would make Wallace less dangerous" (Clark, 168). Ultimately that meant, as Carter explains, the Administration "would have to let the Tuscaloosa crisis unwind, and live with the uncomfortable reality that, within limits, Wallace was calling the shots" (134-5).

But the administration was not alone in wishing to avoid violence. Wallace, too, did "everything conceivable to make the confrontation symbolic, not physical" (Clark, 215); the University was sealed off and a curfew imposed, and Wallace insisted in a variety of media that his followers "stay away from the campus at Tuscaloosa" (cited by Clark, 200). The stand in Tuscaloosa was, says Thomas Healey, "a piece of political theater"

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(134). And even if, as Marshall Frady observes, it was “little more than a ceremony of futility” (170), what is crucial is that it was televised futility, televised political theater. Like the Kennedys, Wallace perceived early on the importance of television performance, and he stage-managed the event precisely, checking camera angles and positions well in advance of the arrival of Katzenbach and the students (Dorman, 128), and positioning himself and Katzenbach to his own advantage, as Katzenbach understood immediately and to his chagrin: “white lines ‘like stage instructions’ showed ‘everyone where to stand in the production’ said Katzenbach, who[se own] . . . mark had been painted nearly twenty feet away from Wallace’s podium” (Carter, 148). The temperature that June morning soared early to above 95 humid degrees: Wallace, Katzenbach recalled, “was standing in the shade and he wanted me in the sun. . . . I was sweating enough as it was” (cited by Carter, 148).

In *Forrest Gump*, amid the hurly burly, Hood and Malone approach Foster to register, and as they do, the girl drops one of her books. Rather gallantly, Forrest rushes from the gallery of spectators to return the book to her. What book is it? And what, if any, is the importance of the book? I say “if any” because, most likely, Vivian drops the book in order to give Forrest the opportunity to pick it up (cf., Lavery). Still, let’s give the book some importance, make it a symbol, allow it to have some narrative effect. It is probably not true that for an American audience, the director could achieve an appropriate effect with only the Bible or Shakespeare. Given our “can-do spirit,” our belief in “the American dream,” not to ignore the importance of education to achieving upward mobility, a chemistry or accounting textbook would serve very well—indeed, Malone took a degree in personnel management. Given that, unlike Stanley’s book, no harm comes to this one; and given the conservative and religious character of southern African-Americans, a Bible would serve very well, too. It is quite conceivable that Malone was carrying a Bible on that day.

What Malone drops and what Forrest retrieves is neither Shakespeare nor the Bible nor even Principles of Marketing. It is a notebook, a composition notebook, oddly-sized and with a sturdy black-gray cover, which students still use today: Malone, like Stanley, is an explorer primed to take notes about the unknown. But taking my cue from Greenblatt and, at the same

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time from Zemeckis, I want to use technology to alter the text, to propose that the book is Shakespeare, or maybe even, *Othello*. To make this substitution, however, without access to Industrial Light and Magic's wizardry, I must ask my readers to use imagination to rewind the film and to focus attention on the book Forrest returns to Malone, a book that is now clearly *Othello*, a book that with Malone crosses the threshold of the schoolhouse door.

Victims for Heroes

Most appropriately so, for *Othello*, if not for Malone; as Greenblatt points out, and as I have already mentioned, the principal beneficiary of Shakespeare's work has not been the theater but "the institution of literature" and, in particular, one of its affiliated institutions, education (*Negotiations*, 160). When we think of Shakespeare, we are less likely to think of a live performance than to think of his collected works—"widely acknowledged as the central literary achievement of English culture" (Greenblatt, *Negotiations*, 160-161). And when we think of Shakespeare's collected works, we think of educational institutions, of the school or the university, the places where we first encounter them.

When, in my (improved) version of *Forrest Gump*, Vivian Malone crosses the threshold of the schoolhouse door, with *Othello* in hand, she signals—well, what? If not exactly a liminal or revolutionary moment in the history of the United States, the stand in the schoolhouse door—Hood's and Malone's victory and Wallace's defeat—nevertheless marks, symbolically, the beginnings of two related and powerful movements: the overdue integration of African-Americans into the mainstream of (institutional) power in the United States; and the breakdown of the Democratic Party's New Deal Coalition, that is to say, the Party's abandonment of class politics and embrace of cultural politics, which results (eventually) in an association of the Party with the interests of the heretofore marginalized, and the subsequent abandonment of it by southern whites of all economic classes and by working-class whites in the north. (On the many implications of and reasons for political realignment since the 1960s, see Aronowitz, Carter, Clark, Croteau, Diggins, Edsall and Edsall, Fraser, Gitlin, Lasch, MacInnes, Sleeper, and Tomasky.)

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Quite obviously, as a society we have yet to make sense, intellectually and politically, of these effects of the stand. My interest here, however, is to consider effects more specific to the actual site that does symbolic work not only in *Forrest Gump* but in history as well: the school or university, and the University of Alabama in particular. When Hood and Malone attended classes in the summer of 1963, each was alone, a solitary black student among dozens, or even hundreds, of whites. It was a dangerous situation, and each was afforded a certain measure of protection and security—in the dorms, and for walks across campus to class. Doubtless today a black student at the University of Alabama can find herself alone in class among dozens of whites, as she has in mine, on occasion. And doubtless, too, black students worry about being hassled late at night by the police; but they are not alone on campus, nor, thankfully, are they concerned about being attacked physically by racists. And if matriculation and graduation rates for African-Americans still lag behind those of whites, nevertheless in the fall of 1998, a record number of black students were attending classes in Tuscaloosa: 13.4% of undergraduates and 15.7% of freshmen, according to the University's Office of Institutional Research.

Numbers tell one story, but the carrying of *Othello* onto campus and into class by black men and women also tells another. Different questions are asked and answered; protocols of inquiry are challenged; curricula and canons are changed. As African-American historian Thomas C. Holt insists: "my presence in the academy and the character of my work has much to do with *who* I am, with both my personal history and the collective historical legacy of African-Americans" (395). Such changes to broaden and expand the search for insight and knowledge are all very much to the good, and indeed it would seem, as Bruce Robbins suggests, that "the ability to get one's own experience reclassified as part of cultural capital—which is one description of what multiculturalism is about—should . . . be classified as a genuine if not necessarily momentous redistribution of power" (373).

But for some, what rankles is the qualifier in Robbins's conclusion: these changes do not constitute a "momentous redistribution of power." Following Louis Althusser, we can readily identify the schools and universities as one among many "ideological state apparatuses" through which bourgeois capitalist societies reproduce themselves ideologically, interpellating

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subjects who behave, who “do what they are supposed to do,” as Alan Sinfield points out (4). What the past thirty years have taught is that the schools and universities do this job on anyone, on blacks (and Asians and Hispanics) as well as on whites, on women as well as men. It is for this reason that the multicultural canon, however effectively it blasts the confines imposed by so-called great books, “merely confirms the imaginary ego ideal of a newly constituted professional-managerial class, no longer exclusively white or male,” as John Guillory suggests (38). Rather than revolutionary or subversive, then, such change in schools and universities is inherently liberal and elitist (in the sense of benefiting only a small percentage of groups previously excluded from full participation in educational and hence other social institutions, e.g., Wall Street, the bar, the AMA). This liberalness—both students’ and professors’ acceptance of the meanings and methods of the institution as state apparatus—colors how I teach *Othello*, what I can do with *Othello*. It means I cannot—indeed no one can—use *Othello* “to create classrooms that prefigure the possibilities of emancipation,” as Kim F. Hall claims she tries to do in teaching race and gender in courses on Renaissance literature (462). Few students—black or white, male or female—want to be emancipated from institutions that give them access to power, prestige, money, and intellect.

I am luckier, in a couple of pedagogic senses, than Hall, who at Georgetown University actively works, and apparently feels she must work, to induce guilt in her upper-middle-class white students. This she does by focusing classroom discussion of race not “just on minoritized peoples—a practice with which students are familiar, if not comfortable”—but on whiteness and white privilege, notions that engage the distribution of power in society (461). In Alabama, however, as elsewhere in the deep south, discussions of race are always relational, always focused on power: who has got it and who can get it and who can (ab)use it. When southern politicians play the race card, as Alabama’s Fob James did in June 1998, before the Republican Party’s primary run-off, everyone knows what this is about, even the state’s illiterate and unsophisticated.

Thus, in Alabama, in a biracial classroom, one overlooking a grassy mound on the quad that commemorates the burning of the campus in 1865 by Union soldiers, I do not need to work

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to induce guilt in my white students. Guilt emerges palpably in my classroom, the minute I begin discussion of *Othello*, which I do by asking, "how is Othello described in Act One, Scene One?" From these students, who hang their heads, avert their eyes, and shift in their seats, it is a slow process to pry the line cites for "thicklips," "old black ram," "devil," "Barbary horse," "lascivious Moor," and "extravagant and wheeling stranger." But pry I do, and eventually the students are staring at those words, written in chalk on the blackboard in front of them.

In the setting, however, of a liberal institution that offers access to power in the adult world, and with students who focus easily on issues of power in discussions of race and who, indeed, negotiate among themselves for power on campus, I cannot rest after inducing guilt in white students, as Hall seems to be content to do (475). I must do something with those words on the blackboard, and what I do with them is, I hope and in my best judgment, done in the interests of all my students. (For other takes on teaching race in *Othello*, see, in addition to Hall, Christenbury, Erickson, Magnusson, Salway, and Shurgot.)

To begin, I contrast these incendiary descriptions of Othello with the descriptions of his actual worth that follow them, by which we discover that Othello is of royal status, that he loves Desdemona truly and deeply, and that "another of his fathom" is not to be found in Venice. Othello is "the noble Moor whom our full senate / Call all-in-all sufficient" (4.1.260-1). When I ask students to consider why Shakespeare might begin his play in this fashion, it does not take long for someone to suggest dramaturgy: 1.1 is exciting theatrical stuff. Nor does it take long for someone to suggest that Shakespeare invokes stereotypes in order to dispel them or, conversely, that even a successful black man, confident in his abilities and achievements, is vulnerable to undermining by a racist white society. As more than one African-American student has said, "Othello is a victim!"

It is at this point that I begin what for Shakespeareans after Greenblatt is usually the first move: to historicize. And, as Lynda E. Boose recently argues, "if ever a topic needed to be waylaid, queried, and 'debrided' of acquired meanings before discussion of its origins might fairly begin, surely it is the discourse of race" (35). The point of such debriding ("a medical term for controlling infection and removing 'foreign matter' by scrubbing away

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the upper layers of skin" [305, n. 1]) is crucial not just for research but for teaching as well. Thus, it is useful to point out Elizabeth I's attempts to expel blackamoors from the realm in 1596 and 1601, as well as to describe the traditional association on the English stage of Moors with villainy, and, in addition, the traditional association within Christianity of blackness with sin and evil (Barthelemy; D'Amico). Such facts lend force to Hall's hypotheses that, for example, Renaissance crafts designed in black and white "may reinforce the value of whiteness" or that portraits of Elizabeth, imbued with light and white, portend "an understanding of racial difference which could be identified as biological" (466). Yet it is also useful to note that this is a strongly xenophobic culture in which "general contempt attached almost indiscriminately to various aliens/foreigners/Others/outsideers," including not just despised Jews and Muslims, but Catholics; not just Germans, French, and Italians, but Welsh, Scots, and Irish. In such a society, in which nationalism itself was merely emergent, the portents Hall describes by no means were designed or destined to develop into "the delusion of race as contemporary Anglo-American culture understands it" (Boose, 36, 37).

Indeed, in the classroom, and perhaps especially in a classroom in the Heart of Dixie, it matters whether *Othello* invokes "a world where all people were to some degree subject to others and enslavement was a misfortune anyone might suffer" or whether it invokes "one where the enslavement of certain groups of people was scientifically justified as natural" (Slights, 389; Wilson; Beckles). It matters whether the plantation model established in the West Indies and on the southern mainland of North America was "required by burgeoning capitalism," as Dymna Callaghan claims (211), or was a mutation of feudalism, that is, a residual social formation "strongly rooted in the English rural seigneurial family-household tradition" with its grotesque social divisions and inequalities (Craon, 513; Colins, 251-3). It matters, that is, whether Prince Hal's joke in *1 Henry IV* "about drinking with any tinker in his own language" does indeed suggest "that for him the lower classes are virtually another people, an alien tribe—immensely more populous than his own—within the kingdom." And it matters whether the Prince's attitude images that of others among the English elite

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who settled in the New World and “regarded the American Indians less as another race than as a version of their own lower classes; one man’s tinker is another man’s Indian” (Greenblatt, *Negotiations*, 49).

One man’s tinker is another man’s Indian: to be sure, the vast majority of my students in Alabama are stunned when I relate this and other such possibilities to them. Almost all of them—white and black—confess to knowing nothing about “race relations back then,” as one of my students put it. Furthermore, I would be less than honest as a reporter if I did not acknowledge that tension in the class shifts perceptibly: at the beginning of this discussion, with its focus on the play’s incendiary slurs, black students feel vindication and white students feel guilt. At the end of the discussion, as we historicize the meanings of those slurs and their relationship to slavery and contemporary racism, white students feel some relief and black students some disappointment. Yet the point of all this is not to “avoid the difficulty” *Othello* causes readers “by taking refuge in a historicist argument,” as Michael Bristol warns some try to do (176; Ferguson, 211-2). The point is to resist the kinds of easy anachronisms students (and theater audiences) tend to make: like George Wallace, Shakespeare was a racist; like Rodney King or O.J. Simpson, *Othello* is a victim of a racist white society. These are judgments that stop discussion and close minds, that bolster rather than complicate or question ideological binarisms associated with contemporary racial designations. In historicizing the play, all of us are reminded that “race” has been culturally constructed and not just culturally deconstructed through contemporary interventions by courts and legislatures. And we are reminded that both the construction and deconstruction are complex processes, fraught with contradiction.

Ben Okri has said that if *Othello* “did not begin as a play also about race, then its history has made it one” (563). Others have suggested that, especially in the wake of the murder trial of O.J. Simpson, *Othello* is and has been a touchstone for race in this country. With both of these assessments I agree, as indeed everyone must. But for me, *Othello* is such a touchstone because, in the classroom (and this in contrast to the stage, where *Othello*, like *The Merchant of Venice*, may soon be unperformable), it allows for discussion of “race” that does not trade in the highly

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charged, binary terms of the present or even of the last century.

Twenty-five years ago Leslie Fiedler argued that “it would be a mistake to think of *Othello* as trading on the kind of horror at the mating of a black male and a white female commonly felt by, say, American audiences of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. . . . since the whole notion of miscegenation had not yet been invented” (172). Similarly, it would be a mistake to think of *Othello* as trading on some of the more divisive assumptions of identity politics. T.S. Eliot was wrong to suggest that in his last speeches, Othello is merely cheering himself up. And so, too, are my African-American students wrong to suggest that Othello is merely the victim of a racist white society. The latter is, arguably, anachronistic, but both arguments go against the grain of literary form, in this case, of one that interrogates the nature of the historical and, thereby, of violence and power: “not figuring universal and absolute . . . loss of value, but—transitional— inability to render value into either dramatic or political practice,” Shakespearean tragedy suspends “sovereign history” (Barker, 213, n. 8, 213).

Unlike those who propose to use a literary form, the anecdote, to construct history, Barker proposes to use a literary form, tragedy, to deconstruct or interrogate history. Recall that tragedy is the imitation of noble action, and Aristotle’s judgment was reinforced again and again in literary treatises of antiquity and the European renaissance. As Milton explains in the preface to *Samson Agonistes*, tragedy “hath been ever held the gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all other poems” (549). The tragic hero must be of elite status and of excellent character, and like other tragedies, *Othello* establishes for its hero a “principle of *individual* freedom and independence, or at least that of self-determination, the will to find in the self the free cause and source of the personal act and its consequences” (Hegel, 59). Or as Othello himself puts it,

I pray you in your letters,
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
Speak of them as they are; nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice; then must you speak
Of one that lov’d not wisely, but too well:
Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought,
Perplex’d in the extreme; of one whose hand,
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away,
Richer than all his tribe: of one whose subdued eyes,

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Albeit unused to the melting mood,
Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their medicinal gum; set you down this,
And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian, and traduc'd the state,
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him thus. (5.2.341-357)

Taking responsibility for his actions, as Hegel argues all tragic heroes must (e.g., 102), Othello becomes, as Nietzsche says of Oedipus, “a pattern of nobility, destined to error and misery despite his wisdom, yet exercising a beneficent influence upon his environment in virtue of his boundless grief. The profound poet tells us that a man who is truly noble is incapable of sin; though every law, every natural order, indeed the entire canon of ethics, perish by his action, those very actions will create a circle of higher consequences able to found a new world on the ruins of the old” (60).

Othello and Oedipus engage in risky business, but what their risks, their tragedies, show is “the problematicity—the unforeclosed character, and thus the critical and diacritical value—of the historical” (Barker, 110). Few of us are exceptional, and in constitutional democracies, arguably not one of us makes choices on which “depends / The sanity and health of this whole state” (*Hamlet*, 1.3.20-1). Yet we are all responsible, in smaller ways, for the sanity and health of the state. Knowing, in this postmodern moment, that we cannot ground our choices in the transcendental or utopian, we can at least go back to the future: negotiating “an exchange with texts from the past . . . can give us a sense of the otherness of our own point of view, thus provoking us to grope for alternative ways of world-making.” Texts like *Othello* or *Oedipus* cannot guide us in our world-making or tell us which direction to take at the cross-roads, but, as Thomas concludes, our engagement with them “itself calls attention to our position in the muddled middle of a present that is a moment of historical *translation*, not one of mere *transition* within an inevitable historical process” (211).

Forrest Gump for the State Trooper

Writing about the complicated, at times contradictory, meanings of *Forrest Gump*, Judith Zinsser concludes that “there may

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be much in the movie that social historians can be grateful for. In many ways he idealizes what we teach and write: "Forrest Gump, the simple, poor, but earnest young man who in wandering through his own life participates in the great events of his era" (97). Well, yes, but "idealizes" is a telling word choice: despite the admirable efforts of social historians to tell history from below and to acknowledge, thereby, how much history has been omitted from History, what the social historians give us only glances, can only glance, at that omitted history. For as Raymond Williams says, "the most uneventful life would take a library of books to transcribe" (207). Social history, furthermore, is history from below written by an elite, who choose from above to tell us the stories they want to tell. This is what gets Greenblatt into trouble with Barker, an inability

to tell over a thousand stories, each with its slight variants. The problem is not only a lack of patience but a sense of hopelessness: after a thousand, there would be another thousand, then another, and it is not at all clear that we would be closer to the understanding we seek. So from the thousands, we seize upon a handful of arresting figures who seem to contain within themselves much of what we need, who both reward intense, individual attention and promise access to larger cultural patterns. (*Fashioning*, 6)

Truly, we can do only so much, as Virgil writes in the eighth eclogue: "non omnia possumus omnes" (1.63).

As it turns out, the poor and the earnest, the unarresting and the hopeless, do participate in the great events of an era. But mere participation, being in the photo, so to speak, is hardly enough, as Enobarbus puts it in *Antony and Cleopatra*, to earn "a place i' the story" (3.13.46); that takes the ability to "reward" the "intense, individual attention" of the brilliant writer. As it turns out, being in the photo is sometimes just enough to get one erased from the story; in *Forrest Gump*, Forrest's insertion into the filmed historical record requires that another be erased.

A look at photographs taken at the stand reveals that several Alabama State Troopers were erased from the film, making space for Forrest. Like all of us, those troopers have histories, and their presence at the stand was significant—for them, and even for us. One of those troopers, a 26 year old, found himself

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stationed beside Wallace by accident. The trooper had wandered into Foster Auditorium, which was air conditioned, seeking relief from the heat, but then, events moved quickly, Katzenbach appeared, and the symbolic confrontation began. Wallace needed guards, and the 26 year old was ordered outside. It was a "fluke," his daughter told me, that he stood there at that moment, captured in photographs that circulated throughout the world and found their way into the history textbooks she would eventually carry home from school. It was a fluke that he was stigmatized, for some, forever.

Postmodern Populism for Modernist Elitism

Also a fluke is that I should have come to know about the trooper's daughter, even if the young woman was a student at the University of Alabama and is rather bold—oddly, I think, both proud and ashamed—about her connection to a famous moment: she carries in her wallet a tattered newspaper photograph of her father at the stand, which, at the least provocation, she pulls out to show her friends, her classmates, and even her liberal Yankee professors. And yet, these flukes and their representation in anecdotes have meaning, and not just as "the smallest minimal unit of the historiographic fact" (Fineman, 57). What more, if anything, can they tell us about the politics of a critical discourse that relies on the anecdote as a significant means of constructing history?

To answer that question, it is useful to broaden this discussion by alluding to some key features of the postmodern: the disappearance not only of "a sense of history" but also of "the individual subject, along with its formal consequence, the increasing unavailability of the personal style" (Jameson, "Society," 125; *Logic*, 16). What we find in postmodern artistic or intellectual production is not confident access to fact or selfhood but rather a characteristic and "complacent play of historical allusion and stylistic pastiche" (James, "Politics," 105). History in particular is to be constructed using techniques that suggest its disappearance—the anecdote, storytelling, pastiche, and even the latter's new historicist analogue, what Walter Cohen calls "arbitrary connectedness," a tendency to connect arbitrarily one aspect of culture to any other (34).

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Furthermore, the flukes captured in anecdotes, like the flukes captured in pastiche or in what is arbitrarily connected, are significant precisely because we have lost faith in our ability to construct history or philosophy or literary criticism, anything that requires us to "discriminate between knowledge and habit, truth and ideology, fact and fiction" (Simpson, 62). Flukes may be all we've got, but what is important is this: by avoiding the achievement of personal style or the claim of special competence or insight, the artist or the intellectual participates in postmodernism's "populist program," which "very specifically repudiates the old myths of the high modernist demiurges or geniuses" (Jameson, "Substitution," 186).

But is this in fact the case? Do pastiche, arbitrary connectedness, and the like signal a successful postmodern populist program? Does the anecdote allow us to acknowledge "the little guy" (Simpson, 60)? Do these stylistic quirks in fact repudiate individual genius and, I might add, the institutional locations in which such a genius works and is supported? In my telling of *Gump*, *Othello*, and the trooper, I argue no: criteria of judgment and merit may have changed, but in postmodernist practice as in modernist practice, now as then, what is required to make the obscure visible is the ability to "reward" the "intense individual attention" of the brilliant artist, in this case a writer who, through the force of his or her personal style, is able to reward the attention of other brilliant folks, all of whom are wielders of institutional power—editors, publishers, reviewers, and readers alike. Little is new in the postmodern penchant for the anecdote or storytelling: for writers, concludes David Simpson, these are "methodological preferences long established within modernity" (61). And they must be respected. Otherwise, the story will not be told; and if the story isn't told, the trooper will remain invisible, of no account, a little guy unacknowledged.

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