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REVIEW



Lessons for Whiteness: Keith Hamilton Cobb's *American Moor*

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The summer of 2020 unfolded painfully—almost literally. Two catastrophes – the new COVID-19 and the “ancient grudge”, systemic racism – attacked BIPOC, and more especially, Black people. Amidst this deadly chaos, as protesters called for justice on behalf of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Elijah McClain, Shakespearean scholars (as they often do) asked what Shakespeare can offer this moment. But what can a white, Renaissance author writing for a nascent imperial nation have to offer these times? Perhaps the answer must be a humble “nothing”. Rather, Shakespeare studies would benefit from listening to BIPOC anti-racist voices instead of co-opting them. Indeed, Shakespeare’s plays have long been revised, reimagined, and retold to speak to a particular historical situation and purpose, including anti-racist activism, wherein “blacks have found in Shakespeare a source of joy, inspiration and innovation even as they resist his use as an agent of dominion” (Cahill and Hall 4). Keith Hamilton Cobb’s play *American Moor* embodies this innovative spirit, resonating powerfully for the twenty-first century.

American Moor follows an unnamed, middle-aged Black actor (Cobb) auditioning to play Othello for a young, white director (Josh Tyson). During the audition, the actor shares with the audience meditations “on the walls erected around Shakespeare by those who control its knowledge and production, the politics of *Othello* in performance, and the experience of being a racialized subject in the world of and beyond Shakespeare” (Dadabhoy 84). I have watched *American Moor* twice now; I find this production incredible for its artistry but also for the intellectual and emotional labour Cobb undertakes for his predominantly white audience. Indeed, even as the play speaks to multifaceted audiences, *American Moor*’s script reveals that Cobb recognizes his audience’s whiteness and approaches them generously. In a prefatory note he explains that though the audience’s “discovery” will not “leave them in comfort”, they should nevertheless be approached “with love and an open heart”, for the actor “takes responsibility for their trust” if the “tale is to be heard, and more importantly, believed” (2). But what exactly does the actor

want the audience to hear and believe? *American Moor* undertakes the difficult work that so many well-meaning white people who want to become anti-racist allies request from people of colour. “How can I recognize racism? How have I never noticed it before? Am I a racist? How should I react?”, they ask. *American Moor* provides generous answers to these common queries. In doing so, it holds a mirror up to America’s white supremacist nature, offering up at least three key lessons for white audiences as they move from the “discovery” begun by watching *American Moor* to meaningful action in their lives.

Lesson 1: You Have Racist Presuppositions About Blackness that Must be Discarded

White supremacy’s dynamics are front and centre in *American Moor*, particularly in the way it delimits Black subjectivity. The actor uninhibitedly trusts the audience with intimate reflections on how he has ended up auditioning for a Shakespearean role he once hated, in part because it was the only one afforded him. Early on, the actor divulges a formative educational moment that reverberates throughout the play when he relates how he wanted to perform soliloquies spoken by Hamlet, Romeo, and Titania. Yet his acting teacher insisted, “Pick something you might realistically play!”, suggesting Aaron, Morocco, and Othello instead (9). *American Moor* makes it clear that the same colour line confines the actor’s first offered roles to the gangster trope Americans are “meticulously taught to recognize”, or the “Black sitcom buffoon ... Not a Hamlet in the lot...” (25). The actor likewise notes how Othello too must “do a number” for the Venetian senate “In order to succeed in getting from them the thing that *you* think he wants” (17). *American Moor* thus contends that white supremacy’s circumscription of Blackness is longstanding and pervasive.

In riposte, the play powerfully dismantles this curbing of Black subjectivity. The actor confidently strides across the stage, moving from joy to anger to humour to sorrow to being “exuberantly hopeful” (Hall xi), as he juxtaposes lines in Italian with slang and cursing. As the actor demonstrates a command of Shakespeare’s verse alongside the play’s beautiful dialogue, *American Moor* demonstrates the inadequacy of the Senate’s and director’s views of the Black men before them. So too, the white audience brings restrictive presuppositions regarding Black identity, the same ones that easily characterize the work of BIPOC Premodern Critical Race Studies (PCRS) as less rigorous because it is too provincial or label protests for justice as riots. *American Moor* leaves no space for these assumptions, prying them loose through Cobb’s powerful performance of speaking truth to power.

Lesson 2: Beware of Centring Whiteness. Centre Black Voices Instead

The play depicts how whiteness centres itself by functioning as the seemingly universal standard and perspective against which it measures all others.

Circumscribing Black subjectivity plays a key role in this centring: the white perspective serves as “the hovering forces ... that have never allowed me to be me” (17). *American Moor* expresses these forces as wide reaching, which influence the emotions the actor is (dis)allowed to express in life and on stage, the roles he is (dis)allowed to play, and even when he performs the proffered roles, the ways he is (dis)allowed to execute them. For the conflict at the heart of *American Moor* is a contest between the director’s white, facile vision of Othello and the actor’s Black, multifaceted one, a perspectival contest playing out daily in America (and beyond). The director communicates his desire for an obsequious Othello in a tone suggesting a recommendation but that unfolds as more of a mandate, thereby embodying the assumption that “Shakespeare is inherently associated with white men and that their shared identity with him provides them a level of expertise with this material” (Adams). The actor makes the stakes transparent for the audience, explaining, “in matters of race, throughout my American life, whenever some white person, well-meaning or otherwise, has asked me to ‘be open’ they have invariably meant, ‘See it my way’” (Cobb 17). Even if articulated politely, whiteness leaves no room for perspectival challenges.

American Moor starkly presents such centring as “unacceptable” (17). The actor powerfully champions his complex, humane version of Othello, one that he arrived to, tellingly, through the intervention of Black ancestors who caution, “Precious baby, that white man whose eyes ya been lookin’ at yourself through, he’s always gonna need to see certain things, whether they’re there to be seen or not” (27). It is only “in that sacred moment ... [that he] suddenly could not *not* care for Othello” (27, 28). It is not enough simply to realize how whiteness imposes its perspective; the next step entails ceding the previously white-dominated space to diverse voices. As white people used to centring themselves move toward anti-racist mindsets, this is a lesson well-remembered. Does the still largely white Shakespeare studies professoriate predominately cite and assign the voices of white Shakespearean scholars, or do they leave space for the contributions of BIPOCs? Similarly, when white people search for anti-racist education, do they turn to white-centred works like *White Fragility* written by white author Robin DiAngelo, or to the multitudinous BIPOC voices who have long laboured in the anti-racist trenches? *American Moor* makes it abundantly clear that the former only results in reinscribing the “tyrant custom” of whiteness’s rules, protocols, and circumscriptions (38).

Lesson 3: True Transformation Only Occurs if you Undertake the Anti-racist Work

Cobb’s script makes clear that the play may discomfort audiences but also transform them into fellow “travelers on the road with him [the actor]” (2). This is the same mutuality the actor extends to the director, but not without labour. Up until the play’s closing moments, the actor shares his innermost

thoughts only with the audience, offering a more constrained version of himself to the director. By the end, however, he invites the director on the journey that the audience has undertaken. He pleads with the director to “put down your little brief authority” and dialogue. Cobb’s words signal the work involved in such an interchange: “Go deep”; “Engage me”; “talk with me”; “Tell me what scares you... what hurts you”; “Stand up and throw down”; “have... courage”; “Trust me”; “Commune with me” (41). While it is not a BIPOC’s responsibility to help white people with their anti-racism, the actor generously offers this gift. How does the director react? He replies ambiguously: “... Thank you... Thanks for coming in” (42). In a post-show discussion, Cobb and Tyson shared that the nuances of this moment change from performance to performance; they purposefully leave it indeterminate. Audience members must therefore decide both how the director responds to the actor, and how they will too.

Indeed, the play closely aligns the director and audience, for Tyson sits quietly in the audience until he utters his first line and remains there until he stands for his final one. Thus, the audience shares his perspective, his literal view, of the actor. Do they do so by the end of *American Moor*? Only each person knows, just as only each person knows how they will rise up to meet this particular historical moment’s call for anti-racist transformation. Thus, *American Moor* includes another prescient parallel – white individuals must grapple with whether they will or will not engage in the work required by their newfound discovery. Will those who centre Shakespeare do so by turning to the Shakespearean (re)creations of BIPOC artists like Cobb? Will white viewers agree to travel with the actor, and outside of the theatre, with anti-racist voices demanding transformation just as the actor has done? That story remains to be written. But *American Moor* powerfully resonates with this moment in its hope for all that committing to a new vision offers, both for Shakespeare and this American life.

Disclosure Statement

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