

# 10

## OFF THE RECORD

### Contrapuntal theatre history

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“Alla pia calia! Siamo siamo bernoguala!” or, “Good day to you, slave! We are Bornu people, yes we are!” the audience could hear in Munich on the evening of Saturday, 6 March 1568 (Figure 10.1). That night, as part of the festivities organised for the wedding of Wilhelm V, heir to the dukedom of Bavaria, to Renata of Lorraine, the renowned Flemish-born composer Orlando di Lasso had his *moresche* songs for six voices performed in the bride’s apartments. That was only one of the many musical performances that Lasso, who had been the duke’s *maestro di capella* for the last eighteen years, would oversee during the two weeks of wedding festivities. That night, he chose exotic pieces that he had composed in his youth, in all likelihood during his stay in Naples from 1549 to 1551 when he entered the service of Constantino Castriota, almost twenty years before the wedding.<sup>1</sup> *Moresche* songs belong to the genre of *vil-lanelle*, secular popular songs in Neapolitan dialect that flourished in the mid-sixteenth century (Operstein 2012, 13). *Moresche* dramatise comic courtship scenes within the early-modern Afro-Neapolitan community and unfurl profanity-laden dialogues between the stock characters of Giorgio and Catalina (or Lucia), who, like all Africans in this genre, sing with thick, mock-African accents.

Aesthetic objects with the *moresc-* root often give rise to contentious conversations between scholars who insist on a clear demarcation between north and sub-Saharan Africans in early-modern racial imagination and those who do not; yet such discussions do not apply to Neapolitan *moresche*. Indeed, thanks to the extensive investigation led by Gianfranco Salvatore and his research team at the University of Salento, we now know that the words scholars had for so long discarded as mere gibberish in *moresche* lyrics were lifted from Kanuri, a language spoken in the empire of Bornu (now north-eastern Nigeria), which, involved as it was in the trans-Saharan slave trade, provided early-modern Naples with a large segment of its slave population — unlike the Iberian Peninsula and other major Italian cities that used Atlantic routes for slave trading purposes (McKee 2008, 321). This means that the Afro-Neapolitan population that *moresche* song caricatured was unambiguously Black.

To summarise Salvatore’s findings, *moresche* show us that white Neapolitans were aware that differences in ethnicity (Bornu versus Mandinga) and status (free versus not free) played an important role in relations (especially romantic ones) within the Afro-Neapolitan community (Salvatore 2011). They also teach us that white Neapolitans could pick up on the most



Figure 10.1 Orlando di Lasso, *Libro de villanelle, moresche, i altre canzoni*, 1582. Munich: Bayerische Staatsbibliothek. 4 Mus.pr. 60 fol.11v. urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb00075511-0. Used with permission.

common Bornu words, and that they perceived music to be a central component of Black life in Naples: Giorgio tries to seduce Lucia by serenading her “with his bagpipe and his drum” in “*O Lucia, miau miau*,” and he alludes to a “Bornu street party” in “*Alla la pia calia*” (Rice 2015, 6, 3). Finally, *moresche* show how sensitive Neapolitans were to the accent with which Afro-Neapolitans spoke: in that sense, those songs are strongly reminiscent of the accent to be found in the *habla de negros* spoken by enslaved Black characters in contemporary Iberian comedies (Fra-Molinero 1995; Jones 2019). *Moresche* were probably a creolised version of the oral modes used in Iberian culture to represent West African characters that grew in the outpost of the Spanish Empire that was early-modern Naples. As a musicologist, Salvatore notes the “insistence on incisiveness and rhythmic variety” of *moresche* songs: although striking, Salvatore comments, those are not directly ascribable to authentic African music. In that sense, the rhythm of *moresche* is comparable to the Black accent: it was not realistic, but it was a comedic imitation recognisable to a Neapolitan ear (2011, 104; see also Nettl 1944, 112).<sup>2</sup>

Eric Rice notices in hitherto unpublished research that, on the frontispiece of the well-known 1621 series entitled *Balli di Sfessania* (Figure 10.2) — which theatre historians use as a primer on the visual culture of commedia dell’arte — French engraver Jacques Callot associates lyrics excerpted from Lasso’s *moresche* songs with commedia dell’arte stock characters. “*Lucia mia!*” one grotesque-looking character lovingly exclaims while Lucia peeps at him through the curtain; “*Cucurucu!*” another continues; “*Bernoualla!*” another responds while playing the tambourine. *Bernoualla*: a French distortion of the Italian word *bernoguala* — that is, Bornu people, the same fictional people who greeted the wedding guests in 1568.



Figure 10.2 Jacques Callot. Frontispiece from the *Balli di Sfessania* series. Etching. Nancy, France, c. 1622. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Public domain.

Callot, during his years of training in Italy, saw much theatre. Since “*Sfessania*” is a distinctly Neapolitan term, it is fair to assume that the series was inspired by performances Callot saw in Naples, where, as this frontispiece shows, *moresche* songs from the mid-sixteenth century had found their way into standard *commedia dell’arte* routines. None of the *zanni* on Callot’s frontispiece are represented as sporting blackface (neither is the actress playing Lucia), which suggests that orality sufficed to convey a distinctly Black identity in the absence of visual racialising tropes. In this chapter, I present the methodological difficulties and ethical pressures faced by historiographic attempts at reclaiming that acousmatic facet of the early-modern performative culture of racialisation in our particular day and age. Then I propose a model of historiographic practice called “recording.” That model, which takes seriously the conceptually fertile polysemy of the word “record” in the early-modern period, aims at enabling theatre and performance historians to navigate those difficulties without abdicating their projects of reclamation.

### Sounding race in early-modern Europe

While Salvatore identifies a precedent for the genre in 1549 (2011, 98), the first known collection of *moresche* was published anonymously in 1555; thus, Orlando di Lasso’s stay in Naples coincided with the years that saw the birth of that musical genre. Because the archives of theatre and performance history often accrue around famous artists and court performances, virtually all we know about the genre of *moresche* we know through the 1568 performance of Lasso’s youth pieces at the duke’s court in Munich. In addition to the scores that Lasso published in

1582, the Italian composer and poet Massimo Troiano, working under Lasso's direction, was commissioned to write a description of the festivities in his *Dialoghi*:

the Saturday, they did not leave the palace, and after eating, they played cards in the apartments of the illustrious bride, and the wind instrument players entertained the distinguished guests for an hour with Orlando di Lasso's *moresche* for six voices: six wind instruments accompanied six select and sonorous voices.

*Troiano 1569, 145v<sup>3</sup>*

What has hitherto gone unnoticed in those sources is Troiano's intriguing mention that the *moresche* were to be performed by "sei scelte e sonore voci" (six select and sonorous voices) (1569, 145v). Since Troiano does not systematically attach such technical specifications to the numerous musical performances that punctuated the wedding celebrations, one can wonder: did the genre of *moresche* require particularly "sonorous" voices? Was this a way for white Neapolitans to try and render what they believed to be a "Black voice," along the same lines as a mock-African accent and a mock-African rhythm, in cross-racial musical performances? Did "sounding Black" involve performative vocal features that went beyond the technique of the accent and involved, instead, timbre, defined as "everything about the sound of the voice except duration and pitch" (Eidsheim 2019, 10)? To put the question explicitly: was there such a thing as a tradition of racialised timbral impersonation in early-modern Naples and, beyond Naples, in early-modern Europe? The existence of such a tradition would help us understand Lasso's decision to perform Afro-Neapolitan *moresche* — whose humorous dimension requires a familiarity with standard Neapolitan dialect — for a German-speaking audience that, according to Troiano, knew overall too little Italian to understand what the commedia dell'arte skits played during the wedding festivities exactly meant (1569, 148). The humoristic dimension of the Afro-Neapolitan accent was most likely lost on the German listeners, but there might have been another aspect of vocal racial impersonation — timbral impersonation — that was not lost on any audience. Such a tradition, because it would not have been tied to one specific European language, would also have made *moresche* welcome at the court of Charles IX, where Lasso performed five years after the wedding (when the French king tried to poach him from the Munich court). Lasso's *moresche* scores were reprinted in France and in the Low Countries at the end of the century: could a tradition of timbral impersonation have facilitated the success of Lasso's *moresche* across continental Europe?

In a thought-provoking article where she invites musicologists and theatre historians to talk to one another as they account for the musical practices of commedia dell'arte performers, Emily Wilbourne (2010) excavates a play called *The Little Slave* (*Lo Schiavetto*), which was written and published by Giovanni Battista Andreini in 1612; it was performed at the French court of Marie de Medici, among other locations. That play features a couple of scenes where white Italian characters perform racial cross-dressing: in one of them, Virginia Andreini, the prima donna of the Fedeli acting company, performs the role of Florinda, a Neapolitan lady who dons the disguise of the eponymous little Black slave and sings a song in that disguise. Drawing attention to the vocal facet of impersonation in that scene, Wilbourne argues that Virginia Andreini's performance, which, within the play itself, does not betray her true identity, is construed as authentic because, in early-modern musical culture, tessitura was not marked in terms of gender:

Her pitch is arguably the least important element of her sung scenes. At a time when castrati and male falsetto voices were common, the tessitura of Virginia's voice would have occupied a soundworld contemporary audiences understood as androgynous;

high voices were frequently used to depict the youthful voices of boys and young men, or, metaphorically, to represent elevated passions or even personalities of singular strength and power. While counterintuitive to modern ears, Virginia would have sounded no less male by singing in the soprano register. At the same time, to seventeenth-century listeners accustomed to the sounds of male sopranos (castrated or otherwise), the feminine timbre of Virginia Andreini's vocal performance would have been only more apparent. It is precisely this contradiction that the anonymous encomiastic poems from the *Codice Morbio* celebrate. It is Virginia's vaunted ability to dissimulate both male and female qualities that squeezes the hearts of her audience.

Wilbourne 2010, 37

Wilbourne reads the actress's act here as a virtuosic act of obfuscation enabled by the musical culture in which that very act originated. I wonder, however, how taking into account the possible existence of an early-modern tradition of Black timbral impersonation might change the reading of that scene. What if Andreini modulated her own voice at that moment? What if the character of Florinda — who, like any proper Neapolitan lady trafficking in blackness, should know about the musical tradition of *moresche* — drew on that tradition in her musical act of racial impersonation? Might it be the case that the play's characters found Virginia/Florinda's musical act of racial impersonation convincing because she *tried* to make it convincing in the first place?

As previously mentioned, the Iberian theatrical culture of the *siglo de oro* (of which Neapolitan *moresche* were an extension) was extremely attentive to sounds and heavily mobilised orality as a mode of racialisation by scripting its characters' accents into the printed texts that have reached us. Yet Spanish *farsas* from the Renaissance suggest that the technique of accent does not render the full extent of that attention to the sonic dimension of theatrical racecraft. Indeed, those *farsas* insist repeatedly on the grain and quality of Black women's singing voices, regardless of accent. In *La farsa teologal*, written by Diego Sánchez de Badajoz between 1525 and 1547, a Black woman enters: "viene una Negra cantando y tañendo con su pichel" (singing and drumming her jug) (1882, 110). A theologian and a shepherd, enchanted, try to keep her singing by all means available. Similarly, in *La comedia de Eufemia*, published by Lope de Rueda in 1567, the character of Eulalla, a Black woman, enters singing during a courting *paso* that has been read by Natalie Operstein as providing the template for Neapolitan *moresche* (Operstein 2012, 14). As she sings, her suitor, Polo, comments "Que embebida esta en su música" (how lost is she in her music!) (Rueda 1567, 27v). In *El coloquio de Tymbria*, a short play included in the same volume as *Eufemia*, an interlude features Fulgencia, a Black woman with a strong temper, to whom Isacaro asks, full of hope, "Tieneste la voz que solías tener?" (Do you still have that voice you used to have?) (40v). Upon receiving a positive answer, he starts playing the guitar for her to sing a love song called "La Comendadoras" (41r). Spanish Renaissance playwrights, it seems, were keen to stage Black women as characters who enjoyed singing, who did it particularly well, and who put their soul into their music. Those characters were performed by white actors — male for Sánchez de Badajoz's plays, and possibly female for Lope de Rueda's plays (De Salvo 2008) — which suggests that the Spanish tradition of racialised oral impersonation involved work aimed at rendering what was perceived as the natural timbre and texture of a Black woman's voice.

Following Joseph Roach's insight that "the pursuit of performance does not require historians to abandon the archive, but it does encourage them to spend more time in the streets" (1996, xii), one could probably glean many hints at the existence of an early-modern tradition of racialised timbral impersonation from walking the streets and entering the buildings of early-modern Spain that have survived to this day. For instance, if one were, as I recently was, to enter



Figure 10.3 Organ by Salvador Pabón y Valdés, 1779. Iglesia San Pedro y San Pablo, Granada, Spain. Photo by Noémie Ndiaye.

the beautiful *Mudéjar* church of San Pablo y San Pedro, built in the historical centre of Granada after the Spanish Reconquest, one would find in the church's choir a baroque organ created in 1779 by Salvador Pabón y Valdés (Figure 10.3), whose lateral tube panels are decorated with *mascarones* (masks) (Ferro Ríos and Linares López 2000, 110). The slits (technically called the "mouths") of the four large bass pipes on each side of the organ were turned by the artist into the mouths of four identical faces whose gender is not readily identifiable, but which are all endowed with the same dark brown skin, dark hair, large noses, and disproportionately large lips. When that organ is in use, then, the deepest sounds produced by the instrument seem to come from the mouth of Afro-diasporic figurines: by means of ornamentation, the organ signals that its makers perceived a distinctive quality to Black voices. Although that organ was created in the second half of the eighteenth century, its inclusion of Black figures in the economy of devotional Catholic practices evokes the large Black population that lived in Granada from the sixteenth century onwards and the strength of religious life in popular perceptions of Afro-Spaniards throughout the early-modern period. Thus, that organ is the product of a culture whose early-modern roots saw Sánchez de Badajoz and Lope de Rueda premiere their characters of female Black singers.

What I am suggesting is that the practices of cross-racial impersonation that have to this day been apprehended primarily through a visual filter and, more rarely, through an auditory filter attentive to accents, have ignored a potentially central paradigm: that of timbral racial impersonation. Musicologist Nina Sun Eidsheim's ground-breaking work on racialised timbre and vocal performance in the modern world strongly informs my reflection here: Eidsheim has shown that, contrary to the common idea that there are "Black voices,"

timbre is not created by laryngeal physiological differences connected to race. Timbre is not essential. Rather, perceived timbral colouration, or “acousmatic blackness,” is the product of entirely performative practices informed by social dynamics: it is shaped by performers’ conscious or unconscious decisions, by the racialised expectations that listeners project onto performers, and by the influence of teachers and vocal coaches who inculcate performers with those expectations and “beliefs in difference as manifested through sound” (Eidsheim 2008, 22). Eidsheim eloquently describes the vicious circle of vocal racialisation: “reification of notions of race through the performance of vocal timbre is circular: audiences join sounds with concepts; (live or digital) performers respond to these sound/concept compounds, and in turn confirm the listeners’ linkages” (27). Eidsheim locates the origin of those linkages and expectations in “the colonial period,” and she traces them through the figure of Manuel Garcia II, “the first singing teacher to draw on scientific data (1840)” (23). However, based on the archival fragments curated over the last few pages, I suggest that, just like “the colonial period” itself, those linkages might have started much earlier: in the early-modern period. My assumption is that the early-moderns were just as good as we are at using performance in the service of racialisation: they invented most of the performative tools we are using today, consciously or not, to sustain racial formations. As tantalising as the prospect might be that racialised voice impersonation pre-dates the modern era, an evidentiary problem will predictably arise here. As theatre historians, we are trained to ask: are such fragments as a turn of phrase in Troiano’s account of the 1568 wedding, a fetish for Black women’s voices in Spanish Renaissance *farsas*, or an Andalusian organ from 1779 sufficient evidence of the existence of a tradition of Black timbral impersonation running from Granada to Munich and Paris via Naples in the early-modern period? And if not, what then?

### **Methodologies of reclamation**

Theatre historians have long been trained to follow and value what José Muñoz (1996) felicitously called the “regime of rigor (mortis),” which, through protocolar apparati, works — unwittingly or not — to uphold an institutional ideology excluding minoritarian (queer, non-white, feminist, disabled) concerns and scholars from the sphere of authoritative knowledge-production.<sup>4</sup> Institutional logic, Muñoz noted, manifests in the “imperative to maintain the stability of evidence despite the acknowledgement that evidence is always already contingent under the pressure of post-structuralist and post axiological inquiry” (1996, 8). Twenty years later, Muñoz’s critique remains valid and urgent. Our reliance on the Record — the archive taken as the sum of available and valid evidence — remains a major impediment to the work of race scholars whose projects of reclamation focus on early time periods.

For those scholars, multiple hurdles make it hard to work with the Record as mandated by the “regime of rigor.” First, it is now a largely accepted view that the creation of records meant to be used later on as historical evidence is not any more neutral than any other historical process: shaped by specific interests, the Record is a heavily curated resource. As Geoffrey Cubitt eloquently puts it,

historical sources are not just evidential objects that passively await the historian’s critical scrutiny: often, at least, their production and survival reflect earlier efforts either to hold on to elements of a past or present reality that might be in danger of being forgotten, or to influence the retrospective judgments of posterity.

2007, 29

When it comes to race relations and race formation, the curating process of Record-making often works to conceal uncomfortable situations. Imtiaz Habib found in *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500–1677: Imprints of the Invisible* that

despite the plentifulness of black people in early modern England that documentary materials [legal, taxation, medical, and parish archives] reflect, they do not for the most part appear in contemporary accounts of the land. ... Tudor-Stuart black lives are imperceptible in the cultural acknowledgements of the age.

2008, 19

In my own research, I found even stronger mechanics of obfuscation at work in early-modern French theatrical records. Because the early-modern Record was produced by Europeans who were involved in the systemic dynamics of race-making, it is always already scratched.

Another feature that makes the early-modern Record a challenging workplace for early theatre scholars interested in race is its limited searchability. For instance, in a thought-provoking essay on Morris dancing, Claire Sponsler uses the lack of definitive descriptions of Morris dance and the entanglement of available descriptions with other performances to point out the gap between historians' needs and pre-modern representational practices:

Our tendency as scholars is to seek to pinpoint morris dance as a single entity, to delineate its constituent parts, and to isolate it from other events and performances. But no amount of archival searching will ever fully satisfy those desires when the representational practices encoding medieval morris dance refuse to pinpoint, to delineate in our categorical manner.

2010, 93

Running a systematic word search for “Morris” and all its orthographic cognates through all available and imaginable databases simply will not do when pre-modern records do not use the word “Morris” to talk about what we are searching for under the label “Morris dancing.” The example chosen by Sponsler is particularly clear because it focuses on a practice for which later historical developments have given us a keyword: Morris. But what about representational practices for which neither we nor the early-moderns have a ready-made keyword? If one were to look for cases of Black timbral impersonation in early-modern culture, for instance, which keyword would one enter into the databases? Which Boolean searches would form the magic equation? And how would one search all the relevant non-Anglophone archives (for Naples, Iberia, Munich, and Paris) that have not been digitised yet, without spending in the archives a time that, as Patricia Ybarra incisively shows in “History Takes Time” (2010), is simply not available to most scholars in neo-liberal academia? There is, lamentably, little time for us to look for needles in haystacks — even less so to look for irregularly shaped needles.

The evidence-based “regime of rigor” that impedes minoritarian research projects derives from an old analogy that sees historians and judges as united in their mission to “inquire” and establish facts. That analogy, however, is woefully inadequate to theorise revisionist historiographic practices, for reclamation historians will claim the role of counsels, rather than judges.<sup>5</sup> Judges' primary goal is to avoid mistrial by following protocol: their investment in procedural conformity makes them complicit with an institutional logic more concerned with preserving itself than anything else. If Critical Race Theory (CRT) has shown anything over the past thirty years, it is that the justice system and its protocols are always already biased against minoritarian groups (Delgado and Stefancic 2012). Changing the judicial system, as CRT scholars know,

requires the intervention of activist lawyers, not judges, and this observation bears, within a certain analogical framework, on how we should theorise the work of historians.

Theorising projects like my own exploration of early-modern possible practices of racialised timbral impersonation as the work of a lawyer or an advocate has implications for our definition of the Record. During a trial, lawyers actively participate in the creation of a Record of court proceedings, to which other lawyers will in the future be able to turn to in order to reserve the possibility of appeal or to claim precedent.<sup>6</sup> Just like lawyers, historians engaged in projects of reclamation do not simply inherit and analyse the Record, they help create it. The Record is a version of the past turned towards future uses: as Derrida notes, the archive is “the question of the future itself” for “if we want to know what this will have meant, we will only know in the times to come” (1995, 27). The “spectral messianicity” that animates the archive means that archive fever might be the “irrepressible desire to return to the origin,” but that very place of origin was created — like the court’s Record of proceedings — with a proleptic drive. In its dialectical relation to time, the Record is for the living: that very realisation has fuelled the ongoing revisionist turn in theatre and performance historiography.

Indeed, over the past thirty years, the living have shaken things up, and historians have been reckoning — unevenly, but increasingly so — with the legacy of post-structuralism. It is now part of a historian’s training to acknowledge the constructedness of facts, the degree to which historiography is conditioned by one’s own horizon and positionality, as well as the Record’s tendency to marginalise minoritarian figures and concerns. In his description of mainstream historiographic practices in the United States aimed at aspiring historians, Robert F. Berkhofer Jr. writes: “to separate facts from interpretation is to misunderstand and misrepresent what historians do and can do. . . . Many historians also argue that facts cannot be separated from one’s ultimate values and beliefs” (2008, 40). The development of oral history in particular brought power dynamics to the forefront of debates on historiographic method, as Berkhofer suggests when he cites British oral historian Paul Thompson: “the very power structure worked as a great recording machine shaping the past in its own image” (18).

In the specific domain of theatre history, a growing awareness that historical accounts must be useful for the living and their children and thus ask the past questions rooted in the present with methods as diverse as the questions themselves has gained traction, largely under the influence of Performance Studies (Wiles 2012, 4). Performance Studies (a field itself informed by oral history) has, from its earliest days been committed to recuperating alternative forms of memory engaged in a dialectic relation with the Record. Whether it be the repertoire as it opposes the archive according to Diana Taylor (2003), or the forms of resistance to ideological erasure afforded by Joseph Roach’s concept of surrogation (1996), or the possibilities of “counter-memory” offered by performance as that which, in the words of Rebecca Schneider, “remains differently” (2012), Performance Studies is in the business of reclaiming memory — more often than not, minoritarian memory. Performance Studies has enabled and emboldened theatre historians to embrace their own reclamation drive and the “What if?” mode as a legitimate mode of inquiry. For instance, Ellen MacKay has made a strong case for “the preservation of enchantment” in theatre history (2010, 23): she argues that because our object of study, theatrical performance — which is, by definition, always already lost — “lies somewhere between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual” (26), positivist approaches to the theatrical Record along the lines of the evidence-based “regime of rigor” will not do.

New approaches, methods, and questions have been embraced in the name of reclamation, a process that bridges the gap between the past and the present along reparative lines. MacKay’s essay includes phrases such as “doing justice to the past” or “doing right by the dead” (2010, 26) that bespeak that drive to reclamation. Her sharp observation that “we are hamstrung by our

own hermeneutics of suspicion” (29) evokes the need to emancipate historiographic practices from the hegemonic rule of what Eve Sedgwick theorises as the underlying relational stance of the hermeneutics of suspicion — paranoid reading — to embrace a complementary reparative stance. A reparative relational stance towards texts, archives, and performances is a stance that is open to changes, surprises, and hope: “its fear, a realistic one, is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self” (Sedgwick and Frank 2003, 149). Historiographic reclamation is the process through which historians assemble and confer plenitude on an object of inquiry from the past that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate present moment of political struggle. While the paranoid stance that fuels Critical Race Theory is the most immediately visible part of race-focused historiographic projects of reclamation, at their core such projects are powered by a reparative drive.<sup>7</sup>

To resume my bird’s-eye-view description of the field’s landscape: the permeation of theatre history with the values of Performance Studies over the past thirty years has led to the ongoing development of new historiographic models whose openness to “enchantment” now falls on a wide spectrum. For instance, Thomas Postlewait, at the more conservative end of the spectrum, insists that theatre historians must “honor the constraints imposed by the available evidence” (2012, 239), and while advocating for explanations “built carefully out of a set of possibilities and probabilities,” he acknowledges that:

Some historians are capable of intuitive leaps of interpretation. They possess a talent, like a spider, for spinning connecting threads. And like a spider they are capable of leaping across the empty spaces, landing gently on the available historical nodes. Weaving the strands across the emptiness, they create a connecting web that transforms the emptiness into a unified design.

2012, 241

The metaphor of the theatre historian as a spider spinning a web that makes the best possible use of gaps in the Record and archival emptiness finds its actualisation in a project like Roslyn Knutson, David McInnis, and Matthew Steggle’s *Lost Plays Database* launched in 2009. Other models, such as the one advocated by Erika Fischer-Lichte, aim at reckoning productively with the discrepancy between the “historicist ideal of completion,” that “deceptive hope that it could be possible to completely reconstruct the theatre of a period ‘as it really was,’ if one only has sufficient material at hand” — which “still seems to provide the objective” in too many cases — and “the partial nature of the approach as the condition for the possibility of writing theatre history” (Fischer-Lichte 2004, 6). The “partial nature” of our approaches is, of course, informed by our own critical and theoretical orientations, for as Claire Sponsler eloquently puts it, “we must realise that the meaning of archival evidence depends to a large extent upon not only where and how we look at the records, but also which narratives we bring to bear on the task of interpretation” (2010, 101). At the more radical end of the spectrum, we find new historiographic models such as the one recently articulated by Heike Roms, which destabilises the category of evidence by reading it as a performative event:

Evidence is not a thing but an event that is situated and mediated, and which relies on the co-creative presence of others. Such others also, crucially, include not only the subjects of the research but those whose stake in the performance of evidence is less obvious: the listener to a conversation, the audience at a re-enactment or the reader

of an essay. It is in their eye or ear or thoughts that something shown, demonstrated or argued becomes plausible, persuasive, evident.

2016, 166–7

This understanding of evidence leads to collaborative and intersubjective historiographic practices in relation to evidence retrieval and analysis.

The ongoing transformation of our discipline — the revolution of revisionist theatre and performance historiography — remains incomplete to this day. The revisionist project powered by Performance Studies has fallen short of its own perhaps over-exigent ideals. As Rebecca Schneider points out, “if the twentieth-century was famous for, among other things, criticising the concept of historical facticity, such criticism has not resulted in the end of our particular investments in the logic of the archive” but, rather, in the expansion and diversification of the archive (2012, 140). Susan Bennett also underlines the “limitations of the historiographical turn we call revisionist history” (2010, 64) when she notes that the diversification of the archive has ironically come with intellectual pigeonholing and over-determination.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, that revolution has been punctuated, like any slow transformative process in the academy, by the frustrating palimpsestic recurrence of questions — or battles — that one thought had already been put to rest. Jacky Bratton captures that phenomenon most lucidly:

Despite many years of the digestion of Foucault and Derrida, not to mention writers more closely interested in the field, like Greenblatt and Orgel, it was still possible in 1999 for the respected theatre historian Robert D. Hume to refer to New Historicism as “an unfortunate complication” and to assert a version of the credo of the positivist which he calls “Archeo-historicism” in the face of the widely held consensus about the non-neutrality of facts. Robert Hume is by no means alone in maintaining an antiquarian interest in the stage.

2003, 3

Even in less extreme cases, the historical ethos has been pegged for so long on an evidence-based “regime of rigor” that many theatre historians, while reckoning with post-structuralist changes, will deploy the language of caution — perhaps because, as Herman Paul remarks, the “epistemic virtues” through which historians have defined and appraised their own craft at least since the nineteenth century if not earlier, namely “honesty, carefulness, accuracy, and balance” have themselves remained stable, unquestioned, heavily inculcated, and deeply felt (2011, 1).

The encounter between a disciplinary ethos proudly prone to the stasis-inducing virtues of caution and circumspection and the reparative drive of projects of reclamation informed by Performance Studies takes adjustments, repetitions, and patience — but it also takes a strong and continuous collective drive. Indeed, as frustrating as the palimpsestic dynamics that move the field of theatre history ever so slightly forward every time might be, even they are not guaranteed. One cannot afford to take that critical ebb and flow for granted or assume that the “regime of rigor” will not return as the dominant framework for good. And one cannot afford either to neglect the concept of facticity in an age that has been called the age of “post-truth.” Thus, theatre historians and historiographers simply must, consciously and transparently, position themselves on the spectrum of openness to methodologies of historical reclamation. The remainder of this chapter constitutes an attempt at positioning my own method on that spectrum. By sketching a specific historiographic model called “recording,” I seek to honour what I perceive as a double ethical mandate that is particularly urgent within the bounds of the here

and now, and yet exceeds them: the double ethical mandate of upholding the notion of facts while opening up interpretations of the past that thrive on the subjunctive mood.

### Recording: song of Barbary

The historiographic practice that I call “recording” aims at breathing performance back into the Record. As theatre and performance historians, we analyse the historical Record and we produce a Record of proceedings with political implications for our colleagues to revisit in the future. Yet to recuperate the full scope of the term “record” in the early-modern period, we also have to consider the performative meaning that the word had back then, when it was a synonym for “singing.” Indeed, while a majority of early-modern lexicons define the noun “record” as “a testimony” or “a witness” and attach it to the legal domain, their definition of the verb “to record” is bifurcated. It meant “to remember,” “to go over something in one’s mind,” and to “think about something,” yet it also meant “to sing,” primarily for birds, and by extension, for humans (OED). One example among many, Randle Cotgrave’s *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues*, translates the French verbs *rossignoler* as “to record, or sing, like a Nightingale,” and *regazouiller* as “to report, or to record, as birds, one another’s warbling” (1611, np).<sup>9</sup> It is probably from that meaning that the instrument known in English as the “recorder” derives its name. When extended to humans, “recording” referred, specifically, to a singing technique particularly popular in the baroque age: in *Monsieur Thomas*, John Fletcher contrasts “recording” with “maine singing” (1639, G4v), and in Cotgrave’s *Dictionarie*, “to record in singing; to answer in the same note, or tune” is the phrase that serves to define the French verb *contrechanter* — to sing in counterpoint. Recording thus referred to a mode of singing that was meant to accompany another melodic line: the contrast between both tunes was not meant to be perceived as a contradiction, but rather as an enriching degree of sophistication that enhanced both melodic lines. Let us imagine what it would mean for theatre and performance historians to take early-modern polysemy seriously and, consequently, not only to analyse and write the Record, but also to sing it in counterpoint.

Singing has a long-standing relationship with memory: it is, as early poets knew, one of the most ancient mnemonic technologies available. As the Greek myth goes, Clio, the muse of History, and Euterpe, the muse of Music, are sisters: both take their being from the divine union of Memory (Mnemosyne) and Energy (Zeus): they are two facets of the same mnemonic enterprise. Recording is a practice that gives the past a new breath as that past resonates in us — both literally and figuratively — and is passed on to listeners. Euterpe has no use for the evidence-based “regime of rigor” followed by Clio, rather, her own rigorousness proves efficient when it reveals complex patterns to its listeners and elicits in them a sense of what the French call *évidence* (obviousness and luminous clarity). Recording is a practice allowing the followers of Clio to borrow the techniques of Euterpe without giving them supremacy, which is to say, to use them in counterpoint. Recording is what happens when theatre historians allow their work to operate on more than one mode, weaving a soft contrapuntal song that hinges on *évidence* into their “rigorous” work. I am using the term “recording” here as a metaphor for the historiographic model I am proposing to help theatre and performance historians navigate the double ethical mandate set upon them. The word’s polysemy in the early-modern period suggests that this historiographic model does not depart from the true meaning of and proper treatment owed to the Record, but, in fact, reactivates older modes of thinking about the Record sedimented in the unspoken collective knowledge and wisdom that often informs polysemy.

The historiographic model of recording as I conceive of it is a model that embraces the idea of the senses (especially hearing) as a site of knowledge-production.<sup>10</sup> By returning in the final pages of this chapter to my initial object of inquiry — a possible tradition of Black timbral impersonation across early-modern Europe — I aim to show that this conceptual embrace of the senses does not only operate at the metaphorical level: recording is a historiographic practice that can do justice to that unwieldy type of object in a project aimed at racial reclamation. To Record the practice of Black timbral impersonation, I consider how that practice, if it was indeed in use throughout early-modern Europe, could illuminate in new ways a play like *Othello*, and, more specifically, the song that Desdemona sings before she dies.

Othello often mentions his wife's musical talents: Desdemona "is free of speech, sings, plays, and dances" (III.3 l. 183); she is indeed "an admirable musician — oh, she will sing the savageness out of a bear" (IV.1 ll. 177–8). In Act IV scene 3, spectators are given a taste of her virtuosity:

DESDEMONA. My mother had a maid called Barbary,  
She was in love, and he she loved proved mad  
And did forsake her. She had a song of "Willow,"  
An old thing 'twas, but it expressed her fortune  
And she died singing it. That song tonight  
Will not go from my mind. I have much to do  
But to go hang my head all at one side  
And sing it like poor Barbary...  
[Singing] "The poor soul sat sighing by  
A sycamore tree,  
Sing all a green willow;  
Her hand on her bosom, her head on her knee,  
Sing willow, willow, willow:  
The fresh streams ran by her, and murmur'd her moans;  
Sing willow, willow, willow;  
Her salt tears fell from her, and soften'd the stones" —  
Lay by these —  
"Sing willow, willow, willow" —  
Prithee, hie thee; he'll come anon —  
"Sing all a green willow must be my garland.  
Let nobody blame him; his scorn I approve" —  
Nay, that's not next. — Hark! who is't that knocks?  
EMILIA. It's the wind.  
DESDEMONA. [Singing] "I call'd my love false love;  
But what said he then?  
Sing willow, willow, willow;  
If I court more women, you'll couch with more men!"  
IV.3 ll. 25–53

Later, in Act V, after Emilia has exposed her husband's plot to frame Desdemona, Iago stabs her. She asks to be laid on the bed by her mistress's side, and there, she echoes Desdemona's song:

EMILIA. [to DESDEMONA] What did thy song bode, lady?  
Hark, canst thou hear me? I will play the swan  
And die in music. [She sings.] "Willow, willow, willow."

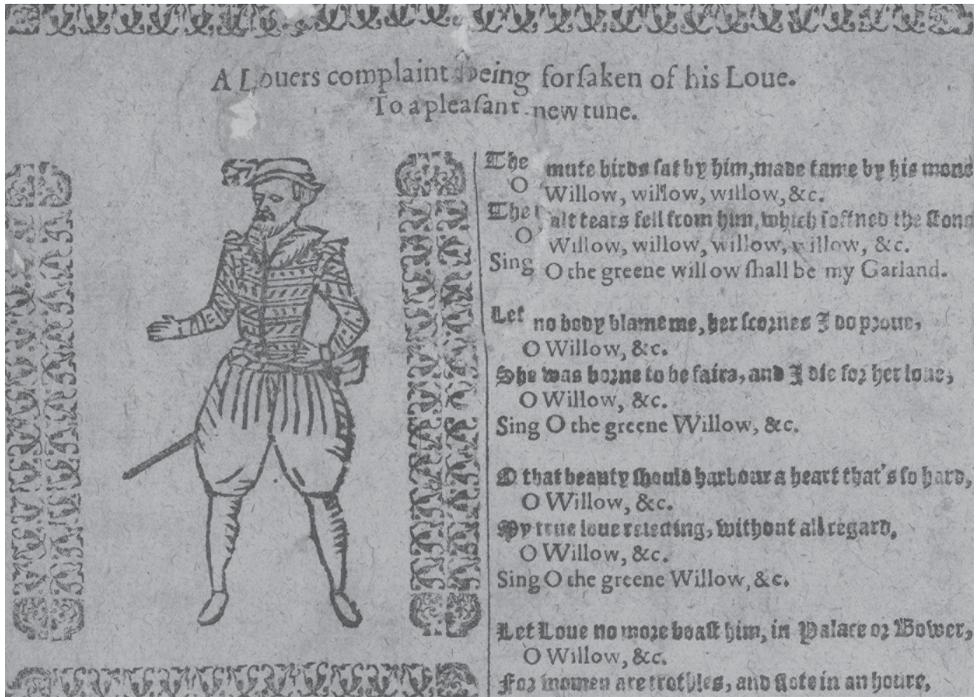


Figure 10.4 “A Lover’s Complaint Being Forsaken of His Love.” Printed at London for I. W., c. 1615. Magdalene College Pepys Ballads 1.358–359, EBBA 20167. By permission of the Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge.

— Moor, she was chaste. She loved thee, cruel Moor.  
 So come my soul to bliss as I speak true;  
 So, speaking as I think, alas, I die.  
 [She dies.]

V1 ll. 240–5

The song performed by Desdemona and reprised by Emilia was a well-known ballad, whose tune has been preserved in a folio songbook compiling tunes from the late sixteenth century. The ballad circulated on broadsides, one of which, printed around 1615, has reached us (Figure 10.4).

As the broadside’s woodcut makes clear, having this ballad sung by Desdemona and then Emilia, Shakespeare strikingly changed the gender of the complaining “lover” — thereby turning a misogynistic piece on its head. Yet, by having Desdemona declare that the “Willow Song” was originally created and performed by “a maid called Barbary” — a name associated with North Africa and often understood as an indicator of ethnicity — he also changed the race of the singer.

I argue that Barbary’s song, as tragic as it may sound, can be productively heard through the filter of the *moresche* tradition that we first encountered in 1568 Munich with Orlando di Lasso. Indeed, Desdemona’s rendition of Barbary’s song departs from the well-known original ballad in a number of ways (“Nay, that’s not next,” she acknowledges): the most dramatic departure occurs in the song’s concluding line, where Desdemona ventriloquises the callous and fairly

salacious response of Barbary's male lover: "Sing willow, willow, willow; / If I court more women, you'll couch with more men!" To spectators familiar with the dignified suffering of the abandoned male lover in the original text, this burlesque turn must have been striking. If we keep in mind that the sung dialogue is imagined in the play as unfurling, originally, between a man and a Black woman from Barbary, however, the burlesque turn in Shakespeare's version aligns with the disparaging sexualising treatment reserved to Black women in *The Merchant of Venice* and in many Jacobean plays that would follow *Othello*.<sup>11</sup>

Most importantly, this burlesque turn aligns with the tone of the bantering scenes of courtship dramatised in *moresche* songs, laden as those are with profanity, sex talk, and imputations against Black chastity.<sup>12</sup> The original spelling used for the ballad's concluding line in the First Folio, "If I court *mo* women, you'le couch with *mo* men" (emphasis added), can read as a racially inflected phonetic distortion foreshadowing Richard Brome's attempt at scripting a Black accent in *The English Moor* more than thirty years later. While the technique of accent — heavily deployed around Irish, Welsh, or French characters — had not been extended to Black characters in English theatre up to that point, it had long been a standard feature of the musical Mediterranean culture of Black impersonation. Shakespeare's play alludes directly to the musical culture of Renaissance Naples when, at the beginning of Act III, the Clown shuts down the musicians' act in Cyprus following Othello's orders: "Why, masters, have your instruments been in Naples, / that they speak i'th' nose thus?" (III.1 ll. 3–4). Attacking the nasal sound of those musicians' performance, the Clown jokes about them spending time in Naples and contracting syphilis there, a venereal disease known to destroy the nasal bridge. The Clown's Naples, construed as a place of sexual contamination and musical performance, is the same Naples that saw the rise of *moresche* songs.<sup>13</sup> As we saw earlier with Jacques Callot's *Balli di Sfessania* series, *moresche* songs were integrated into the repertoire of commedia dell'arte companies during the second half of the sixteenth century. Thus, Italian companies touring France and England could very well have familiarised English audiences with that musical genre. While it cannot be claimed with absolute "rigor" that Shakespeare's reworking of the "Lover's Complaint, Being Forsaken of his Love" was influenced by a direct knowledge of the genre of *moresche*, that contrapuntal possibility cannot be discarded, and it sheds a new interpretive light on Desdemona's song.

Desdemona's *moresche*-inspired song would have had a highly ambivalent effect on spectators. On the one hand, it would have had the potential to reorient the unstable generic identity of the play back in a comedic direction right before its dénouement: after all, Othello is about to return, Desdemona expects him and believes he is at the door every time she hears something creak, and a *moresche* is an invitation for her lover to join in the duet. On the other hand, in that scenario, that invitation, because it relies on a musical genre saturated with anti-Black stereotypes, would not put an end to the couple's misery. Indeed, for Othello to join in the *moresche* would turn him into a vocal and foolish Giorgio-type character, thereby rendering obvious the racialisation of Othello by linguistic means that Robert Hornback has identified as a thread running throughout the play (2018, 198–204). And for Desdemona to perform a *moresche* would turn her into a stand-in for Black women, thereby automatically denying her any claim to chastity and innocence within an early-modern English cultural mindset. Regardless of intentions, then, Desdemona's invocation of the *moresche* form would have precipitated her tragic fate and thickened the play's ambivalent racial discourse with a poignant degree of irony that does not sound foreign to Shakespeare.

I want to consider the possibility that the boy-actresses who performed the song of Barbary might have mobilised the full scope of the *moresche* genre, and thus used the technique of Black timbral impersonation that may have been in vogue in early-modern Europe. What if

the boy-actresses playing Desdemona and Emilia tried to render what they perceived (or were trained to perceive) as the timbre of Black women's voice? What would we learn about the play?

Desdemona obviously remembers Barbary very fondly, and, invoking this woman rather than her own (conspicuously absent) mother in that moment of utmost distress, she deploys a motherly aura around the Black maidservant who probably had no choice but to nurse her.<sup>14</sup> The song is a medium that carries both Desdemona's memories of and affection for Barbary with luminous *évidence*, giving spectators new insights into Desdemona's long history of loving people of African descent and their voices (it is, after all, with his voice that Othello, the fabulous storyteller, seduced her). This song, in other words, gives us access to an otherwise unspoken history of interracial love whose loss is temporarily offset by the reparative energies of musical conjuration. The history to which this song gives us access is not only the history of Desdemona's affective life. Reworked by Shakespeare, this ballad foregrounds the voice of someone who belongs to a category otherwise erased from the Record in *Othello's* interracial romance: at the intersection of gender and racial difference, Black women, who gave birth and love to Othello yet whom he never mentions, are erased from the story as potential objects of romantic love, affection, and gratitude by the play's main storyteller. When Desdemona sings, however, their voice returns: in performance, that return would most powerfully manifest through Black timbral impersonation.

The voice of Black women returns obstinately in *Othello*: as Desdemona sings, her own interruptions ("Lay by these ... Prithee, hie thee; he'll come anon ... Nay, that's not next. — Hark! who is't that knocks?") cause her song to restart several times. Desdemona will keep talking after Othello has "stifled" her — a symbolic way of silencing her — her voice returns when Emilia, ignoring her own husband's injunctions to silence, reprises Barbary's song on her deathbed. The song functions as a symbol of resilience for women who will not be silenced, even in death: those women draw their energy, it seems, from Barbary's song, and they function as stand-ins for early-modern Black women, real and fictional. That same voice would obstinately return to haunt the Shakespearean corpus: indeed, the song, which was not included in the 1622 Quarto version was included in the First Folio;<sup>15</sup> and it would return to haunt Shakespeare's last play, in the mouth of the Jailer's daughter in *Two Noble Kinsmen*.<sup>16</sup> Blending paranoid and reparative affects for Desdemona and for us, Barbary's song, timbre, and vocal grain reveal and restore a gendered racial past long repressed and silenced in *Othello's* world.

Barbary's song breaks out obstinately and recursively in a play that dramatises on the tragic mode the constructedness of facts, the ease with which "ocular proofs" (III.1 l. 357) can be manufactured for (nefarious) strategic purposes, and the importance of historiographic practices, biases, and intentions, as Othello implores historian-spectators, just before killing himself: "Speak of me as I am; Nothing extenuate, / Nor set down aught in malice" (V.2 ll. 335–6). In that play, Barbary's song is the only weapon, the only mnemonic technology available to minoritarian figures who do not get to control the historical narrative and write the Record. Recording as I see it is a historiographic practice that reckons with the lessons of *Othello*. In this essay, recording meant piecing together available archival fragments suggestively, entering my claim into the historical Record of proceedings so others might revisit it in the future, and, finally, letting readers listen to the song of Barbary — sung in counterpoint by the most "sonorous voices" to the tune of *moresche*.

## Notes

- 1 This is what Orlando di Lasso claimed when he had the *moresche* printed in 1582 (Lasso 1582, 1). Recently, musicologist Eric Rice revived Lasso's *moresche*. Under his direction, Ensemble Origo has performed the wedding's programme in a number of venues, including the Casa Italiana at Columbia

- University, where I had the good fortune to hear them play. I am very grateful to Eric Rice for sharing with me unpublished research he presented at the American Musicological Society in 2018.
- 2 While Gianfranco Salvatore has conclusively shown that the 1568 *moresche* were deeply rooted in the social reality and cultural practices of 1550s Naples, M. A. Katritzky has compellingly argued that Orlando di Lasso's expertise in commedia dell'arte practices, which he deployed during the 1568 wedding, can be attributed to several factors, and not only to Lasso's early stay in Naples (1996).
  - 3 Translation by the author.
  - 4 For Muñoz, who wrote in the 1990s, the "regime of rigor" is the sum of institutionally sanctioned practices, which, despite a professed embrace of "alterity" on a theoretical level, devalues and describes as "ahistorical and flimsy" (1996, 8) the methodologies upon which "alterity"-centric work (such as queer and race scholarship) depends: "work and thinking that does not employ and subscribe to traditionalist scholarly archives and methodologies are increasingly viewed as being utterly without merit. Work that attempts to index the anecdotal, the performative, or what I am calling the ephemeral as proof is often undermined by the academy's officiating structures" (7).
  - 5 For a recapitulation of the discursive deployment of the analogy between the historian and the judge, see Carlo Ginzburg (1991). Despite asserting that the "openness to rewriting marks the difference between a provisional historical judgment and a definitive judicial judgment," Paul Ricœur holds on to the "position of a third party" and the "vow of impartiality attached to this third-party position" in his theorisation of a historian's work (2004, 320, 314). Ricœur's reappraisal of the age-old analogy thus remains too timid.
  - 6 *The Oxford Dictionary of Law* defines the record as "the documents constituting an authentic account of the proceedings before a court, including the claim form or other originating process, the statements of case, and the judgment or order, but usually not the evidence tendered" ("record," Law 2015).
  - 7 For instance, in his recently published essay "Debt Collecting, Disappearance, Necromancy: A Response to John Beusterien," Nicholas R. Jones presents his project to reclaim early modern Afro-Iberian culture and to explore it within the framework of what he calls Early Modern Black Diaspora Studies. Although Jones does not mobilise Eve Sedgwick's work, his line of thinking is certainly illuminated by the paranoid and reparative relational stances that Sedgwick sees as complementary. Indeed, his essay concludes: "our task as scholars and students compels us to reimagine a concealed past as a reparative starting point. In doing so, in a necromantic way, such a reparative starting point not only summons the necrocaptalist and necropolitical foundations of the Western world but awakens the memory of black Africans and their descendants" (2018, 218). I consider Jones's statement here to be representative of our field's drive.
  - 8 Bennett argues, more specifically, that revisionist theatre historiography, in its inclusion of women's theatrical works, has been limited by a hegemonic political perspective ascribing a "predetermined discourse for the discussion of women's plays" (2010, 71).
  - 9 In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Valentine declares that "the nightingale's complaining notes / Tune my distresses and record my woes" (V.4 ll. 1–6), and Patrick Hume notes on his *Annotations on Milton's Paradise Lost* that "young Birds are said to sit and record, when they sing softly to themselves" (1695, 36).
  - 10 The practice I am describing under the name "recording" has little to do with the colonial historiographic practice highlighted by Stephen Greenblatt in "Invisible Bullets," in which colonists produce their own interpretation of facts side-by-side with the dissenting Other's interpretation of the same facts in order to control the narrative. According to Greenblatt, colonial rule "*depends* upon the registering and even the production of potentially unsettling perspectives. ... The recording of alien voices ... is part of the process whereby Indian culture is constituted as a culture and thus brought into the light for study, discipline, correction, transformation. The momentary sense of instability or plenitude — the existence of other voices — is produced by the monological power that ultimately denies the possibility of plenitude" (1988, 37). Although both models are predicated upon juxtaposition, their power dynamics are very different.
  - 11 In *The Merchant of Venice*, when Lorenzo accuses Lancelet of impregnating an otherwise invisible Black woman, Lancelet answers with a disparaging sex joke:

LORENZO. I shall answer that better to the commonwealth than you can the getting up of the negro's belly: the Moor is with child by you, Lancelet!

LANCELET. It is much that the Moor should be more than reason, but if she be less than an honest woman she is indeed more than I took her for.

- Jacobean plays staging the sexualisation, disparagement, and animalisation of Black women include, among others, Webster's *The White Devil* (1612), and Fletcher, Field, and Massinger's *The Knight of Malta* (1618).
- 12 Among the *moresche* performed at the 1568 wedding in Munich, *Lucia, celu, hai* has Lucia insult an enamored and inebriated Giorgio: "Black man of Bornu ... there is nothing for you to lick here ... You are filthy, you pissed the bed! ... Bornu man, unfaithful" (Rice 2015, 5). Inversely, in *O Lucia, miau, miau*, Giorgio, who, earlier in *Hai Lucia, hai* had declared that he wanted to marry Lucia, warns her that "That other man you found doesn't love you" (6).
  - 13 Since *moresche* were the Neapolitan avatar of a widespread Iberian tradition of racial impersonation by vocal means, it is worth pointing out that the presence of Iberian culture in *Othello* has been recently explored by Shakespearean scholars. Eric Griffin, for instance, sees Iago as a vehicle for Spanish racial views in the play (2009). Iago, as it turns out, is also the male character whom spectators hear singing the most in the play.
  - 14 Joyce Green MacDonald insightfully notes here: "A foreign woman domesticated to the uses of Brabantio's household transmitted to his daughter the song's voicing of feminine mourning for lost love, lost integrity" (2000, 212).
  - 15 In her textual introduction to the Norton *Othello*, Clare McManus reminds us: "There has been speculation that the song was cut from the Quarto because when that text was solidified, the company lacked an actor — Desdemona was probably played by an adolescent male — capable of singing the part. ... Scott McMillin proposes that the Quarto derives from a scribe's transcription of a prompt book from a later Jacobean revival — even possibly after Shakespeare's death — and that the missing sections were cut to meet the constraints of performance" (2016, 510).
  - 16 "Then she sung / Nothing but 'Willow, willow, willow' and, between, / Ever was 'Palamon, fair Palamon' / And 'Palamon was a tall young man'" (IV.1 ll. 79–82).

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