

Conversion narratives: Othello and other black characters in Shakespeare's and Lope de Vega's plays

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One of the common features in Shakespeare's plays is the fact that there is no dramatic space for characters which do not diminish their difference through conversion (racial, political or religious), be it compulsory, as in Shylock's case, or voluntary in Othello's case. Othello's autobiography or tale of himself in I, ii is paradigmatic in this respect in as much as it establishes his journey from Africa to Europe as a "pilgrimage" towards Christianity, Europe and civilized values. This sense of pilgrimage as a journey towards perfection is present, as we intend to illustrate, in Lope de Vega's plays such as *El negro de mejor amo*, where the African character converts to Christianity and western values. The result of these conversions will be in all cases a precarious assimilation to a white, christian society. Europe, in turn, will reveal the deeper contradictions which are present in its alleged open nature.

As Werner Sollors explains in *Beyond Ethnicity* (1988: 25), both "ethnic" and "ethnicity" derive from the Greek word *ethnikos* which meant "gentile," "heathen." The noun *ethnos* was used to refer not just to people in general but also to "others." In English usage the meaning became "non-Christian". Thus the word retained its quality of defining another people contrastively, and often negatively. In the Christianized context the word "ethnic" ... recurred, from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century, in the sense of "heathen." According to this definition of "ethnicity" we can say that Africans fell into the category of the "ethnic." The Africans' difference, furthermore, was not only spiritual or religious but also physical. Blackness has traditionally had negative connotations, as we can see if we take a look at the Oxford English Dictionary. When the English first started their voyages to Africa and encountered real Africans they finally found a referent and a recipient of blackness with all its negative connotations. Their theories clearly presented God's curse upon a race which by 1578 was becoming at least physically notorious in England. Queen Elizabeth began to be discontented at the "great number of Negars and Blackamoors which ... are crept into this realm," and in consequence issued two edicts in 1599 and 1601 in which she commanded the infidels should be discharged out of Her Majesty's dominions (Qted. in Jones 1971: 20). The Queen complained about the great number of Africans, and about the fact that they were infidels, and this alone would make them ethnic, but her words reveal certain fear of the "infection of blackness." "There are of late," wrote Elizabeth, "divers blackmoores brought into this realme, of which kinde of people there allready to manie, considering howe God had blessed this land with great increase of people of our own nation" (Qted. in Newman 1987: 148). These words reveal what we can call "the sexual bias" of the expulsion, and the fear of miscegenation —traditionally reputed as one of the causes of the lowering of the physical and mental level of humans (Fannon 1967: 120). Linked with the fear of miscegenation is the belief that, as George Abbot wrote in 1599, "the monsters of Africa ... were bred when contrary kindes have coniunction the one with the other" (Qted. in Jones 1971b: 20); a belief

which, at least unconsciously, ties together miscegenation and monstrosity, two of the issues which are woven into both plays.¹

The Queen's concern was hardly surprising. From Antiquity, historians and travellers had associated all Africans with blackness and monstrosity. This monstrosity was physical but also cultural: Pliny described men that had "neither nose nor nostrils, but the face all full. Others that have no upper lip, they are without tongues, and they speak by signs, and they have but a little hole to take their breath at .." (in Jones 1971: 5). For Herodotus, Africans were "all inveterate conjurers, and given to the black art" (in Jones 1971: 4). Some traveler reported how "it is the manner among them, for every man to have many wives: and the fellowship of their wives, that other use in secret: they use in open sight" (Qtd. in Mason Vaughan 1994: 55). Leo Africanus wrote in his *Geographical History of Africa* about the jealousy of the Numidians: "For by reason of jealousy you may see them daily one to be the death and destruction of another, and that in such savage and brutish manner that in this case they will show no compassion at all" (Qtd. in Jones 1971: 25). For John Lok, Negroes were "a people of beastly living, without a God, law, religion, or commonwealth" (in Jones 1971: 12).

What happened in Spain?

As Castile conquered back parts of the Peninsula which had been occupied by the Muslims, Spaniards came into contact with Africans. This earlier and more frequent contact with Africans explains the fact that unlike the British, the Spaniards did not tend to supplement the image of the African with the literary images of the black men which had crystallized in travel writing since antiquity. In the 14 and 15th centuries the Spaniards started to use Africans as slaves on plantations recaptured from the Moors, and in the process, the belief that to be a Negro was to be a slave started to take shape. This tendency became dominant and was gradually institutionalized when Africans were transported to Spain's American colonies as slaves (St. Clair Drake 1990: 262). However, as Drake explains, blacks were not singled out as targets of persecution in 15th century Spain. Religion, not skin color, was the mark of ethnicity, as Werner Sollors remarked. The "enemy" in 15th century Spain was composed of Moors who became Christians, Moors who adopted Spanish language and customs without converting, and *conversos*, converted Jews. The image of the black man was not, according to Clair Drake, completely unfavorable. Christian Spain developed, for example, the image of the black Madonna of Monserrat and the black Wise man, Balthasar. Another positive image is the black man as saint, like Antiobo in *El negro de mejor amo*, by Lope de Vega. Although of African origin, Antiobo assists the Christians against the Turks and achieves a resounding victory over the infidels. This "positive" image of the African constitutes one of the basic differences between the British and the Spanish in their perception of the Africans. According to Fra Molinero in *La imagen de los negros en el teatro del siglo de oro*, for the Elizabethans the Africans are such monstrous and diabolic beings that their conversion to Christianity was not worth it; for the Catholic Spaniards, however, the Africans, since they possessed souls, should be included within the Christian plan of salvation (199: 7).

Even if blacks and whites mixed freely in 16th century Seville and miscegenation was frequent, Spaniards were obsessed with "purity of blood" (*la limpieza de sangre*). Although mixed blood was not associated with monstrosity, it was regarded as an evidence of moral deficiency and intellectual inferiority (St. Clair Drake 1990: 257). Lope in *El negro de mejor amo* will demonstrate that the only union between a black man and a white woman is a spiritual marriage between two white souls.

In both plays, Othello and Antiobo are viewed as instrumental Calibans; they are extremely useful in order to secure Cyprus/Sardinia against the ever present menace of the Turks (even after death, in Antiobo's case), but still aliens when in Othello's case he intends to marry white Desdemona, or when Antiobo is wooed by white women. Venice and Sardinia appear as open

¹ The discussion about the situation of Negroes in England is further explored in "The Making and Unmaking of a Colonial Subject: Othello", *Miscelánea* (forthcoming).

communities for the purposes of war, but remain closed on the level of politics and the more conservative sense of “the family.” It seems that when Othello narrates “the story of his life” his blackness dissolves. Othello’s difference appears extremely menacing, however, when Brabantio views him as a potential husband for Desdemona. In that case Othello remains a pagan and slave—a mere impersonation of the stereotype (Singh 1994: 289). In the same way, Antiobo’s difference does not prevent him from being a brave soldier (A black Alejandro, as one of the characters calls him), but we can clearly see how nature itself seems to strike down those white women who try to woo him.

Transforming “the other” into instrumental Othellos or Calibans is one of the features of colonialism in both plays. In return, Europe “enlightens” and lifts the aliens through a liberal education and in most cases, through conversion to Christianity. But what kind of education is this Western, supposedly liberal education? It is a kind of education which passes off as universal what is only particular, which presents as historical what is only a subjective account, and which presents as natural what is fully designed and prepared, that is, what is essentially unnatural, as we will see in both plays. What is the aim of this “liberating” education and the conversion to christianity? The aim is to create a class of persons non-European “in blood and color, but European in tastes, in opinion, in morals and intellect,” as Sing remarks. Venice and Sardinia (and Europe in general) are dependent upon the creation of a very particular kind of progeny, not a monstrous progeny through miscegenation, but the “mimic man” as Homi Bhabha would call him. A man who has been “whitewashed” by Western culture, and yet excluded from its full rights (Singh 1994: 292).

Both Othello and Antiobo are in this light “mimic men” who have converted not only to Christianity, but also to the world vision implied in that religion. Peculiar to both plays is the fact that the conversion only functions in one direction: it is the infidels, that is, “the ethnics,” that convert to Christianity and not viceversa. As Selín the Turkish sultan explains, “nunca un cristiano es buen moro” (*El esclavo de Venecia y amante de su hermana* 1918: 340). Although in real life there were defectors on both sides, the christians are described as having noble, stable essences which are in no way corruptible. It is in fact the corrupt nature of Africa that facilitates the conversion or pilgrimage towards christian universal values. Africa is described as the anti-world, as a world upside down, as the site of an essential world disorder. This is clear in Othello’s case. The disorder or anti-world is plain in the wonders of Africa: first its monstrous inhabitants, then their cultural practices. Physical monstrosity is parallel to cultural monstrosity: “the cannibals that each other eat ...”

As a whitewashed character, Othello appears in the play as a colonial subject who has absorbed European culture and morality, and has therefore domesticated the wildness implicit in his origins. He has also exiled from his personality the menacing aspects of the stereotype of the African such as lasciviousness, lust—as he makes clear before the Duke and the Senators (I, iii, 261-264)—, and jealousy—as Desdemona confirms in III, iv, 30-31. Fully immersed in European culture, for Othello the Turk is “the other”. While he feels at ease within his adoptive culture, his own African culture remains absent, or rather represents one of the “stressed absences” in the play. The handkerchief he confides to Desdemona as a family present is the only repository of his own history in the play, a part of the past which represents itself without resorting to language. Apart from the handkerchief, Othello appears as the perfect “mimic man” or converted subject who has assimilated the quintessential western culture. Othello’s cultural references at this early—and optimistic—stage of the play would confirm the open nature of the metropolis and western culture in general. However, as *Othello* will demonstrate, the self-fashioning peculiar to the Renaissance is limited for the black man.

But the infinite possibilities of self-fashioning are manifest in the telling of his autobiography before the Duke, Brabantio, and the rest of the Senators. As an exercise of self-representation, the autobiography is another instance of tamed difference, of a kind of ethnicity which is appealing to his Venetian listeners. In order to become an acceptable and civil character, he only has to reproduce the most familiar images of European travel narratives and colonial discourse when

dealing with the African. In this way he can establish an insurmountable barrier between the monsters in Africa and his civilized self. His autobiography thus turns into a travel narrative which echoes other narratives such as Pliny's, Herodotus', Mandeville's, and other "racial encounters" such as Antony and Cleopatra's. As in the texts of his predecessors, the gap between the European—or Europeanized—and the African is widened; like in their texts, in Othello's narrative "stressed absences" also appear. We do not hear about the nobility, the civility and hospitality of certain African kings. Instead we get the most common features of the Elizabethans' image of Africa and its monstrous wonders. Africa, in Othello's words—like in the words of any other western traveller—is reduced to a land populated by "the Cannibals that each other eat, / The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads/Do grow beneath their shoulders" (I, iii, 142-43).

More than revealing Othello's origins, as critics such as Newman (1987: 150) and Singh (1994: 288) explain, his tale demonstrates that Othello has no access to his past except through a borrowed language and its colonial discourse. Othello's tale reveals as well his narrative position as a subject immersed in Western-European culture looking like a curious traveller at his object of observation, the African, from his western ideological position. The tale does not add anything new to the traditional image of Africa, and in this way reassures the familiar. At the same time, Othello's narrative eases European conscience as if Africa were already known and essentialized once and for all. Equally reassuring in the ears of the Venetians is the sense of progression toward purification implicit in the word "pilgrimage" with all its connotations as a journey towards a mystic center. In this light, Othello's autobiography stands as the conversion narrative of a man who starting in darkness has come to the light. Othello's is therefore a conversion narrative on the level of culture and religion and on the level of language. Unlike Caliban, he does not use language to curse. He has learnt the white man's language and explicitly possesses the world vision expressed and implied in that language. To speak the Venetians' language is to take on a world vision and a culture, as Fannon would say (1967: 38).

In *El negro de mejor amo* Lope de Vega presents another conversion narrative. Like in *Othello*, the darkness of Africa prompts Antiobo to seek Christianity. We see, however, that Lope de Vega presents no monsters in the play. In this we can see how the Spaniards had a more realistic view of Africa. Still, Africa, as Fra Molinero explains, is the site of moral disorder: the killing of the brothers of the new king to protect the kingdom from a hypothetical usurpation (Cf. Fra 1995: 106). Africa is "unnatural" too because it resists and fights the "just" and "universal" cause of the Spaniards. These grounds explain why Antiobo starts a pilgrimage towards western values. Still, Lope de Vega opts for a dignified image of Africa and for a distinguished black queen, Sofonisba. Sofonisba, as a case in point, seems to be another black lady of striking beauty. Even if black beauty is praised, the play embraces the most common views of black and white and their connotations. When the King, Sofonisba's father, gives her over to Dulimán, he apologizes for his daughter's blackness: "aunque negra," he says, "es de blancos pensamientos." These words are evidence of a subconscious racism, and show to what extent the characters Lope situates in black Africa have interiorized the Europeans' view of the Africans. These words, moreover, are very similar to the latent racism implicit in the words the Duke addresses to Brabantio when Othello departs for Cyprus: "Your son in law is far more fairer than black" (I, iii, 290). On her part, Sofonisba seems to have embarked herself on another pilgrimage to lighten her color through her marriage to Dulimán: "vos sois", she says to Dulimán, "el blanco en el que acerté mi vida." This reveals, we can say, Sofonisba's progression towards whiteness and perfection, since lightening the color of her skin was traditionally seen as an improvement to the race. We can see how in this sense the play reproduces the most common beliefs about miscegenation.

Although Sofonisba will be Antiobo's biological mother, she cannot compete with Antiobo's spiritual mother, the Christian woman who nurtured him and managed to baptize him. Consequently, as Fra Molinero explains, Sofonisba does not appear in the second part of the play, when Antiobo is already a young man in search of his real self (1995: 111). Antiobo's baptism proves more determining than his African heritage, which, surprisingly, and as in Othello's case, does not appear in the play and thus constitutes one of those "stressed absences." There is, therefore, nothing African about Antiobo. Baptism has washed off Antiobo's blackness and his "ethnicity." Figuratively, Antiobo turns into a washed ethiope. He becomes aware of the anti-

world of Africa and departs for Europe to aid the Christians in their confrontation with the Turks in Sardinia.

Antiobo's new allegiance to the Christians is expressed as both a liberation from sin and as a new desired servitude. Antiobo is acclaimed as "el negro de mejor amo." Through this naming the Sardinians fix Antiobo, as Kimberly Benston would say, in his irreversible otherness (1984: 152). He does not have a name—maybe he does not need one, according to the Christians—, he is pure paraphrase. This bondage in paraphrase indicates that Antiobo is Christ's vassal; he is the black who belongs to the greatest of Masters. Liberation is achieved, paradoxically, through metaphors of belonging and subordination. From Antiobo the prince he'll become Antiobo the slave—even if he is slave to the best master. Being God's slave, as Fra Molinero explains, is a Christian aspiration. As St. Paul's explains in Romans 6, 20-23, "being made free from sin "one becomes" servant to God." Through conversion to Christianity God grants freedom to his converts. Liberated from the slavery of sin, the convert is now God's slave (Fra Molinero 1995: 102). The implications of this new mode of bondage are multifold, and I have the feeling they don't work in the same way for whites and blacks. Since the natural state of an African in 16th century Spain is slavery, being God's slave can be seen as liberating, since the master is not of this world. But even his state of bondage sets no limits to slavery since God is atemporal and is above time. Being God's slave projects slavery onto the future—*ad infinitum*, we could say—, and confirms the common belief that the most fitting state for the black man is slavery, be it physical or spiritual. The title of the play, *El negro de mejor amo* thus naturalizes a state of bondage for Antiobo in the Christian world.

To accommodate to their new status as Christians, both Antiobo and Othello have to renounce themselves and set up new boundaries which separate and differentiate them from "the other." In the narrative of his life, as we saw, Othello separates himself from his fellow countrymen—Cannibals, anthropofagi, men whose heads grow beneath their shoulders. To mark his belonging to the non-ethnic Christians, Antiobo voices the unequivocal discourse of an intransigent crusader: "¡No quede moro con vida! / que yo con este rosario / lo pienso alcanzar con ruegos, / y con esta [la espada] peleando" 1929: 973).

Through their conversion to Christianity both Othello and Antiobo learn their place as aliens in the new society. Both characters are incorporated into a universal just order. The peculiarities of this new order are well known: in both plays African characters of noble origins become marginal characters: a cursed, cursed slave, as Othello calls himself towards the end of the play; or a slave to the best master in Antiobo's case. In both plays, Europe restores categories and imposes what is assumed as a "natural order." Europe, in other words, situates the African character where he belongs, on the margins: Othello becomes the incarnation of the stereotype: a "Moor", an outcast and a cursed slave who has finally occupied his true position. In this light Shakespeare presents the predictable trajectory of a "stage Moor" who lapses into stereotype unable to resist the "call of evil" supposedly implicit in the deeper impulses of his nature. Antiobo (who is a whitened image of the African as inveterate conjurer) turns into another instrumental Othello who performs miracles and acts when needed by the Christians. By becoming a hermit, he imposes marginality upon himself and remains sufficiently removed from the Sardinians' life so that racial integration in the play is not put to the test. One of the ways in which marginalization is imposed on both characters is through the rejection of miscegenation, a topic which deserves another study beyond these pages.

Othello's and Antiobo's conversions to Western cultural and religious values must have sounded enormously gratifying for Elizabethan and Spanish audiences. Both *Othello* and *El negro de mejor amo* simultaneously integrate and segregate the African characters, thus exposing the double and contradictory nature of Venice and Sardinia. Both plays reveal how when it comes to a black character conversion to Christian values is not enough. Both characters erase their "ethnicity" as they embrace western values but their difference pervades and prevents assimilation. Although there is no space for black characters, Lope de Vega offers a more optimistic case of the cleansing of Antiobo's darkness. Through baptism, God, according to Antiobo, has washed him and made him white. Shakespeare, quite differently, presents towards the end of the play a different case of the washing of the black man when Othello exclaims: "Whip me, ye devils, / From the possession of this heavenly sight! / Blow me about in winds! roast me in sulphur! / Wash

me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire! (V, ii, 278-81). A reference which comes to confirm that the washing of the Ethiop implies destruction.

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