

Antiracism in *Othello* sketch comedy, 1967-1999

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Abstract

Despite Shakespeare's rejection of comic, racist stereotypes in Othello, minstrel shows offered racist blackface caricatures of slaves and others of African descent that filtered through British Music Hall and Variety to television sketch comedy. Analyses of twenty-five screened appropriations of Othello provide a cultural history of racism for 1967-1999. The article recovers an antiracist tradition overlooked in comedy studies.

Keywords: racism, sketch comedy, Frankie Howerd, Shakespeare, Othello.

1. Introduction

In response to the murder of African American George Floyd, Jr. by Minneapolis, Minnesota, police on 25 May 2020, people around the world joined the Black Lives Matter movement in decrying racism. In that moment of heightened awareness of racism, All4, BBC iPlayer, Netflix, and other media outlets removed racist episodes with blackface performances from their streaming video catalogues. In addition to the removal of the racist comedy of Leigh Francis' *Bo' Selecta!* (Channel 4 2002-2004) and David Walliams and Matt Lucas' *Little Britain* (BBC 2003-2007), these comedians and others apologised for their use of blackface. Performers who "black up" or wear blackface makeup in order to mimic people of African descent dehumanise them as cowardly, foolish, hypersexual, inarticulate, shiftless, stupid, and violent.

Such racist characteristics have a long history in Western culture. Classical and medieval discourses first defined Africans in these terms (Loomba & Burton 2007). Subverting this tradition in *Othello*, Shakespeare rejected racist stereotypes, yet other dramatists and later minstrel shows continued to present blackface caricatures of Africans, including *Othello* (Brooks 2020; Hornblack 2018; Rice 1911). Americans transformed this dehumanising tradition to the needs of slavery, and the popular comic mode crossed back over the Atlantic in the 1830s to accompany the rise of the Music Halls. Embodying white supremacist mythologies of the "happy slave" longing for a utopian plantation, these racist figures transferred to British Variety, radio, film, television, and finally to sketch comedy. Twentieth century sketch comedy, however, also used blackface *Othello* to attack racism.

As a cultural and political touchstone, *Othello* consistently serves sketch comedians, politicians, and scholars navigating the fraught politics of race. Regarded as “the most canonical Western play concerning race,” *Othello* “holds a central place as the most important portrait of the racialised Other until the twentieth century and, even in the twenty-first century, cannot be read without race being critical (Chambers 2011: 16). A British *ur*-text on race and racism, *Othello* functions as a redolent but contested cultural resource. In turn, the use of *Othello* in sketch comedy provides untapped sites at which to examine racism and antiracism. As Alex Clayton writes, sketch comedy “licenses the imagination to range over things we habitually take for granted,” opening up possibilities that “generate productive confusion on matters we took to be settled” (2020: 87). Perceived as “safe” entertainment, sketch comedy read critically thus exposes cultural fault lines, including those that define identity (Marx, 2020), uncovering attitudes towards race that “we took to be settled.” As television, furthermore, “is actively engaged in constructing reality with images taken... from the prevailing, consensual worldview (Barry 1988: 86), televised sketch comedy engages tractably with dominant discourses of race. Despite the lack of scholarship on sketch comedy until quite recently, this comic form offers highly useful cultural data for analysis.

Widely studied, situation comedy nevertheless relies upon pre-existing narratives and characters that invariably detract attention from the study of race and racism. By contrast, the compact nature of sketch comedy allows ready aggregation of data and arguably produces a more coherent body of evidence. As the BBC and commercial British television each screened about half of the comic sketches analysed (see Figure 1), these appropriations reached a wide variety of viewers. From multiple broadcasters, these televised uses of *Othello* also lack a univocal institutional bias, providing a more broadly representative sampling of period racial discourse.

			Broadcaster	Blackface on Screen
1	6/10/1967	<i>The Frost Programme</i>	ITV	Yes &
2	25/9/1968	<i>The Frankie Howerd Show</i>	Thames	Yes &
3	7/3/1970	<i>It's Tommy Cooper</i>	LWT	No
4	1/4/1971	<i>Dave Allen At Large</i>	BBC	Yes
5	23/11/1972	<i>Monty Python's Flying Circus</i>	BBC	Yes
6	3/2/1973	<i>The Basil Brush Show</i>	BBC	No &
7	22/2/1973	<i>The Benny Hill Show</i>	Thames	No
8	7/3/1974	<i>Behind the Fridge</i>	BBC	No
9	18/9/1974	<i>Frankie Howerd in Concert</i>	ITV	Yes &
10	19/11/1976	<i>The Muppet Show</i>	ITV	No &
11	6/1/1978	<i>Crackerjack!</i>	BBC	No &
12	21/1/1978	<i>The Les Dawson Show</i>	BBC	No &
13	9/2/1980	<i>The Muppet Show</i>	ITV	No &
14	11/1/1986	<i>The Two Ronnies</i>	BBC	No
15	20/3/1986	<i>Spitting Image</i>	ITV	No
16	1/12/1986	<i>Victoria Wood As Seen On TV</i>	BBC	No
17	3/11/1989	<i>Norbert Smith: A Life</i>	Channel 4	Yes
18	1/12/1989	<i>Hysteria 2</i>	Channel 4	No
19	3/5/1990	<i>KYTV</i>	BBC	Yes
20	21/12/1991	<i>Spitting Image</i>	Channel 4	No
21	4/6/1993	<i>The Real McCoy</i>	BBC	No
22	17/6/1995	<i>Squawkie Talkie</i>	Channel 4	No
23	24/11/1997	<i>Armstrong and Miller</i>	Channel 4	No
24	27/11/1998	<i>Goodness Gracious Me</i>	BBC	Yes &
25	6/12/1999	<i>Blackadder Back & Forth</i>	BBC	No

Figure 1. UK Uses of *Othello* in Sketch Comedy, 1967-1999
 ‘&’ denotes song and/or dance included.

Comedians in the twenty-first century continue to use *Othello* occasionally in sketch comedy (e.g. Sutherland 2016), yet the play's repeated use in late twentieth century sketches requires attention. Furthermore, this period represents the time when "race relations" changed dramatically and irrevocably (Turner 2008) in Britain. The Race Relations Act 1965, in fact, marked the first legislation to counter racial discrimination in the UK and the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 represents the last significant antidiscrimination legislation drafted in the twentieth century. Angela Barry establishes moreover that in this period television served as "an important battle-field" in Britain's struggle to accept itself as "a multi-racial society" (1988: 91). As the most significant text on racism, and as an oft-used television sketch vehicle, then, appropriations of *Othello* offer distinctly relevant and influential representations in the very moment that issues of race changed markedly if not peacefully. Focusing on this moment of change in Britain, the following cultural history deploys formalist and historicist analysis of some twenty-five appropriations of *Othello* used in sketch comedy screened from 1967 to 1999. Other comedy sketches from the period that include the play may exist, but a wide-ranging search failed to produce them. Since comedians in this period use blackface performances to counter racism, their removal from screens *en masse* also erases an antiracist comic tradition.

2. Watching Othello

Shakespeare's *Othello* figures in discussions of racial conflict throughout the period 1967-1999. In February 1968, William Rees-Mogg, editor of *The Times*, attacked the Race Relations Act 1965 using *Othello*. Quoting the law, he wonders, "what constitutes 'incitement to racial hatred.' Any coloured audience watching *Othello* must be extremely vexed by the gullibility of the Moor." After citing other characters, Rees-Mogg asks, "will all villains in future have to be of unimpeachably Anglo-Saxon stock" (15/2/68, 8)? From a privileged position, Rees-Mogg minimises the impact of "racial hatred," glibly redefining it as feeling "vexed." The Race Relations Act prohibited such public discrimination (Bleich 2003), yet unsurprisingly the Political and Economic Planning Report (1967) "concluded unequivocally that there was 'substantial discrimination' against minorities" (ibid. 75). Extending such discrimination by recycling the caricature of the Black man as a violently stupid "villain" (rather than the wronged hero), *The Times* externalises the racist assumptions that position Black men as antagonists to those of "Anglo-Saxon stock." The metaphor "stock," connoting animal breeding, evokes dehumanising racist codes that serve supremacist fictions of a biologically "superior" race.

Deploying such racist codes and rejecting calls to amend the Race Relations Act, MP Enoch Powell represents the ostensibly "inferior" racial Other as nevertheless a deadly threat. In his infamous "Rivers of Blood" speech, Powell reports that within twenty years, "the black man will have the whip hand over the white" (20/4/68; MacArthur 1999: 384). In Powell's alarmist, white-slave dystopia, Britain has been "occupied" by a dark army of immigrants and their descendants, accretively described as "an alien element" (ibid. 385), a "national danger" (ibid. 386), and a "canker" (ibid. 391; cf. Mortimer 1/12/86). Deploying originally racist minstrel images, Powell's popular screed further imagines non-whites as hypersexual, depicting Black Britons as a subhuman force bent on "domination" (MacArthur 1999:391) through uninhibited reproduction and violence.

In projecting a neocolonialist desire for supremacy onto the rhetorical screen of the racial Other, the erstwhile Empire builders become "a persecuted minority," indentured "strangers in their own country" (MacArthur 1999: 388-389), and the formerly enslaved or colonised and their descendants become the new imperialists. Rees-Mogg's "stock" and Powell's "marked physical differences" (MacArthur 1999: 390) represent non-whites also as biologically inferior

to whites (Kirby 2000). If such justifications for the deportation of the racial Other fail, Powell threatens, “I am filled with foreboding; like the Roman, I seem to see the River Tiber foaming with much blood” (MacArthur, 391). Alluding to Virgil’s empire-building *Aeneid* (6.86-87), Powell reduces multicultural interaction to a “cleansing” race war, which will require bloody conflict to (re)establish the White British Empire.

Staving off racial conflict, a September 1968 newspaper article on *The Frankie Howerd Show* superfluously assures readers that the Variety comedian and radio star’s sketch adaptation of *Othello* is funny. Perhaps because the play’s “famous death scene” (Parrett, 1968) enshrines images of murderous Black masculinity and the symbolic rape of Desdemona (Andreas 1995; Little 1993), the article assures viewers that “Frankie’s own version” (Parrett 1968) remains “lighthearted.” As a paratextual frame, the article works to shift attention away from the racial violence in *Othello*.

In line with the article’s diversionary efforts, Howerd’s 6.5-minute Shakespop adaptation (or popular adaptation) of *Othello* invokes and then rejects the kind of racism embraced by Powell. Howerd (as Othello) and guest star Cilla Black (as Desdemona) prime audiences to read the sketch in sexual terms, leading observers to activate traditional racist social scripts of the Black man as a sexual aggressor.

Frankie Howerd: I want you, if you’d be kind, to do something for me.

Cilla Black: Oh, I’d do anything for you, Frankie.

FH: Would you, really?

CB: Yes, I would.

FH: Look, what I want you to do takes place here, [gesturing to a bed] now.

CB: [in shocked tones] Oh! Hey, no, I couldn’t.

FH: What?

CB: Oh no, I couldn’t, Frankie. [looking at the audience, covering her mouth, and giggling demurely]

FH: Now. Now. Just. Please. [dryly] You should be so lucky. No, I mean. [pursing his lips coyly and flirting with the camera] No, but. [Cilla shrieks as Frankie innocently touches her] Here! Oy. You’ve got your corsets on, have you? [looking at the audience] She’s got her corsets on.

(Frazer-Jones 25/9/68)

Iago represents Desdemona’s sexuality as a threat within Shakespeare’s play (Traub 2015; Bovilsky 2008), yet here Black’s diegetic shock and embarrassment, “mistaking” Frankie’s gesture as a sexual invitation, fashions *this* Desdemona as sexually innocent. Simultaneously casting Black as chastely clothed under her dressing gown and Howerd as “cheeky” in his observations, the unseen “corsets” replace Desdemona’s tragic handkerchief. Where corsets restrain the female body, Frankie’s tactile detection and his scripted repetition of “corsets” constitute both revelation and containment of the female body. Transforming the play’s sexual tension, Howerd thus positions Black’s corsets as emblems of lust contained.

Although such a sexualised image of Othello-Howerd might evoke the racist stereotype of the “buck,” or hypersexual Black man (see below), Howerd revises conventional stage makeup practice to reject comically the play’s lust-fuelled racism. Just before the attack begins, Cilla Black exclaims,

CB: Hey! I just thought of something.

FH: What? What’s the matter now?

CB: You should be blacked up.

FH: Blacked up?

CB: Yes, [turning to the audience] shouldn’t he be blacked up?

FH: Does it matter?

CB: Sir Laurence Olivier blacked up. After all, Othello was black, you know.
FH: I know it. I can't say it's all that important. I can't.
CB: Well, I've got to think of my career, Frankie.
FH: Oh!
CB: [corpsing] You'll have to go off and do it. No, you'll have to go off and black yourself up.
FH: Oh dear.
CB: It's got to be done properly.
FH: All right. I'll black up. [He exits]

(Frazer-Jones 25/9/68)

Despite a lack of critical consensus on the general's skin colour, Black's assertion that Howerd "should be blacked up" reflects the dominance of Laurence Olivier's blackface *Othello* (Burge 1965). Returning to the stage, Howerd asks, "is that blacked up enough" and his guest star replies, "that's absolutely fantastic" (Frazer-Jones 25/9/68), which reads as ironic, because Howerd's face remains white with minimal black makeup (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. *The Frankie Howerd Show*, Thames TV, 25/9/68.

In approving Howerd's "fantastic" version, Black redefines the "proper" performance of blackface as *the distortion* of the dominant "blacked up" image of Olivier-Othello. Evidencing some movement away from the racist tradition of presenting blackface on stage/screen, only eight of the twenty-five surviving Othello sketches from the period present images of blackface performers on screen (see Figure 1). Here Howerd provides a distorted version of blackface makeup to undermine racist performances.

Allowing her host to attack the racist use of blackface, Cilla Black leaves the stage, curtails Shakespeare's narrative, and sings, "I know where I'm going," a line from an Irish folk song. Frankie complains, "So now it's a musical. We'll if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" (Frazer-Jones 25/9/68), ending with a radically shortened rendition of "My Mammy," a song made famous by a "blacked up" Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer* (Crosland 1927). Nine of twenty-five of the *Othello* sketches analysed include song and/or dance (see Figure 1), providing a range of interpretive possibilities beyond the immediate scope of this analysis. In any case, Howerd sings only two original lines, "Mammy, my little mammy / The sun shines east, the sun shines west / What do you think I am, Georgie Best?" With this added third line, Frankie catches a football as cameo guest star and 1966 FIFA World Cup champion Bobby Moore asks, "anyone for football" (Frazer-Jones 25/9/68)?

Jettisoning the play's climax, Howerd's sketch chooses not to re-enact the murder nor to reactivate the villainous Other essential to racial conflict as evoked by *The Times* and Enoch Powell. By distorting the traditional image of blackface Othello, Howerd's resulting makeup casts blackface itself distorted. Choosing not to depict a "blacked up" Othello murdering a white woman, the sketch thus refuses to circulate the racist "stereotypes about black male sexuality and black male violence" (Cartelli & Rowe 120) operative in Shakespearean (Bristol 1995) and twentieth century racist discourse.

Howerd's performance of an altered "My Mammy" also refuses the structural vilification of Black men, further positioning his twentieth century blackface comedy as antiracist. Familiar from the BBC's highly popular *The Black and White Minstrel Show*, performances of "My Mammy" distort both Black masculinity and Black motherhood (Williams 2001; Watkins 1999). As a "Deep South fantasy transplanted in Britain," the *Show* offered for twenty years the only consistent image of people of African descent (as "happy slaves who knew their place"), providing Britons with a nostalgic celebration of their White race in "earlier, trouble-free times" as imperial colonisers in Africa and elsewhere (Barry 1988: 87, 92). Dismantling "My Mammy" and the racist material codes of blackface, Howerd's sketch obliquely identifies the *Minstrel Show* as a racist programme even as others deem its song and dance routines wholesome (Grandy 2020; Sandbrook 2010).

In racist contexts such as the *Minstrel Show*, dancing and singing evoke "minstrelsy-derived notions of African Americans as mindless song and dance performers." Represented by racist discourse as spontaneously emerging from within, racist conceptions of dancing reinforce essentialist notions of blacks as uncontrollable and animalistic in their impulsivity. Such racist delusions also decontextualise human beings, "stripping them down to the bare bones of the song and the dance" (Durkin 2010: 100; Barry 1988: 88). Such dehumanising concepts originate with the practice of forcing slaves to sing, dance, and laugh to "prove" that they were happy and no threat to white slave owners (Watkins 1999: 58-60). "Blacked up" white men in the minstrel shows continue this tradition into the twentieth century, forwarding racial hierarchies and the myth of the "superior" white race. Such hierarchies and essentialist racism may find resonance in a 5.8-minute sketch with Rowan Atkinson as a theatre manager criticising Hugh Laurie as Shakespeare and the "tap dance at the end of *Othello*" (Croft 1/12/89).

In both white supremacist America and on the British stage, the use of such vibrant images served invariably racist ends. The musical, racial hierarchies of the British minstrel shows find precedent in the American minstrel tradition wherein Black stereotypes and blackface performances worked to unify working-class whites as sexually powerful when "blacked-up" (Roediger 1999: 118-20) and, later, to critique the upper classes (ibid. 123). As Eric Lott writes, racist stereotypes on stage rely upon the fact that "'black' figures were there *to be looked at...* they were screens on which" fantasies of white superiority imagined "preposterously violent, sexual, or otherwise prohibited theatrical material" (1992: 28-29; cf. Collins 2004). Lott establishes that such racist spectacles dehumanise people of African descent, and some musical Shakespop sketches include *Othello* in their lyrics (Nash 3/3/73; Bell 6/1/78; Bishop, 21/1/78; Harris 9/2/80), embodying the character variously.

Instead of invoking racist and divisive caricatures, Howerd's revised minstrel song invokes the football pitch and the inclusive comradery of kicking the ball with the cast as the end credits roll. Many Black British players joined professional football in the late 1960s (Garland & Rowe 2001), and a picture of Bobby Moore with football rival and Black Brazilian Pelé had been used to promote widely an image of racial unity in the UK. Yet, any implied sense of harmonious multiracial community functions idealistically because racism remained a serious problem for Georgie Best and many footy fans (Bebber 2012). Nevertheless, as "performances of *Othello* 'channel' a prevailing racial construction" (Cartelli & Rowe 2007: 121), Howerd's sketch offers an inclusive, antiracist image that mocks blackface performances modelled on Laurence Olivier's racist *Othello*.

Olivier's racist characterisation served for decades as the dominant model of *Othello* and thus, to some considerable degree, of the marginalised Black man in Britain. For instance, discussing the Race Relations Act using blackface *Othello*, the Parliamentary committee voted against an amendment to allow restaurants to advertise for workers of a specific race. MP Ben Whitaker asked, "Could we not employ the method of Sir Laurence Olivier as *Othello* and use

makeup” (Staff 14/6/68) to employ staff of any race? Later *Othello* sketch comedy, including Harry Enfield in blackface (Posner 3/11/89) and *Spitting Image* (O’Neill 1991), invokes Olivier as the standard for Othello performances without offering antiracist coding. Denying his own racism a month earlier, an Al Jolson impersonator also writes that, “no less a figure than Laurence Olivier blacks-up to play Othello” (*The Stage* 11/5/89: 7). As these comments suggest, Olivier remained the standard model for blackface Othello.

Howerd’s disfigured blackface and retooled minstrel song performatively echo negative critiques of Olivier’s racist *Othello*; the film left British cinemas after May 1968. Britons read earlier that some judged Olivier’s performance as an “outrageous impression of a theatrical negro stereotype” (Ivans 2/2/66). Olivier’s “Sambo” characterisation included “the white man’s burnt cork negro of the minstrel show,” including, “the rolling eyes, the shambling walk,” and “the foolish laughter.” American audiences also asked, “When does he sing “Mammy?”” Such glaring racism explains why others asserted that Olivier imposed a “racist interpretation” on Othello (Higgins 1966).

Curtailing and revising the racist song in his defaced version of blackface, Howerd’s *Othello* aligns with the antiracist critique largely absent from the British press. Howerd establishes an early example of British sketch comedy that evokes blackface to mock it. The comedian’s privileged racial and economic position allows him this critique, yet the deconstructive performance resists reduction to simple racism. Twentieth century *Othello* sketch comedy, in fact, includes antiracism.

3. To Play Othello

Sketch comedians and politicians deployed *Othello* for both damaging racist and constructive antiracist purposes throughout the period studied. In April 1970, members of Parliament debated a revised Race Relations Act, again using *Othello* for racist ends. With race riots in London, roving “Paki-bashers,” and Skinheads terrifying much of the nation (Sandbrook 2010), lawmakers sought solutions to such racist fascism in antidiscrimination law. Modifying the 1965 version, the 1968 act outlawed racial discrimination in “employment, housing, insurance, and credit facilities” (Bleich 2003: 86). Refining employment exceptions, the 1970 amendment subsequently required employers to explain the need to hire from a specific race. Anti-immigrant MP Ronald Bell claims, “someone may want a coloured actor to play Othello. Why should he not be able to advertise for one? Someone may want a white actress to play Desdemona. Why should he not be allowed to advertise for one” (House 1970a; cf. *The Times* 21/3/78: 15)? Opposed to the Race Relations Act, Bell makes *Othello* a tool of racist division, asserting facetiously that a Black actress, “could put flour on her face” to play Desdemona. Ignoring the ineffectiveness of this alternative to greasepaint makeup, Bell says, “one can make a mock-up of a negro or of a white girl, but why should one do that when one can have the real thing” (ibid). In a strangely similar fashion, Parliament cites the need for “authenticity or realism” and thus the need for “a particular race, sex or age for acting roles,” referencing “a black man to play the part of Othello” in the explanatory notes of the 2010 Equality Act (legislation.gov.uk; sched. 9). Not unlike some sketch references to Othello’s “inherent nature” (Brigstocke 24/11/97), forty years earlier Bell defines “the real thing” as something “inherent” to the individual, reinforcing his belief that neither “blacking up” nor “whiting up” will provide authenticity. In a later session, Bell “innocently” refers to the belief “that certain elements of the population are eugenically inferior to others” (House 1970b). In this damaging racist delusion shared with Enoch Powell, “eugenically inferior” “aliens” only “mock” white identities. Such scarring emotional violence accompanied physical violence in the period.

A 1971 sketch from *Dave Allen at Large* and a 1972 sketch from *Monty Python's Flying Circus* bracket contemporary racist violence, evoking both antiracist irony in the mode of Frankie Howerd and, arguably, racism. Racist violence, including the petrol bombing of a party of African-Caribbean Britons in South London, increased due to the restrictive 1971 Immigration Act. Fuelled by the media and ignored by an often-racist police force (Williams 2015; Moran 2013), such conflict finds little place in televised sketch comedy (cf. Barry, 1988). Broadcast three months after the bombing and “blacked up” as Othello, Irish comedian and spellbinding storyteller Dave Allen depicts the murder of Desdemona and the Moor’s suicide in a forty-five second sketch. As the camera reveals two women observing, one states, “I always said mixed marriages would never work” (Whitmore 1/4/71). Dragged up as puritanical, unions-busting Tory women “getting things moving” in Britain, the Monty Python members also invade the couple’s bedroom. In a ten-second section of a 2.3-minute sketch the following year, the troupe interrupts Michael Palin’s “blacked up” Othello kissing an uncredited Desdemona while Graham Chapman-as-Tory-Lady screeches, “come on dear, don’t let that darkie touch you” (MacNaughton 23/11/72). The Pythons beat blackface Palin-Othello with their handbags and pull him from the bed. In this violence, the Pythons strangely respond to Powell’s call to bloody arms and to the racially coded, media-inflamed fear of muggers. Identified as young black men or “trouble-makers” and immigrants (Sandbrook 2010; cf. Barry 1988: 92-93), such muggers emerge within the Oxbridge satirists’ sketch as a stereotypically hypersexual and “blacked up” Othello. Although potentially ironic, such a representation evokes both long-term and immediately racist tropes rejected by Howerd and others without clear censure from the Pythons.

Where the passive-aggressive comments in *Dave Allen's* Othello sketch ostensibly satirise the racist rejection of interracial marriage, and while the overt racism of *Monty Python's* “darkie” exposes Conservative bigotry, both sketches and others (cf. Turner 7/3/70; Beckett 22/2/73; Hurlll 7/3/74) focus on white voices when appropriating *Othello*. Such comedy thereby ignores contemporary racism and Othello’s role in racist discourse. Twenty-first century calls to ban such racist sketches appropriately identify the destructive stereotypes therein, yet they also ignore the antiracist use of blackface by others in the period.

Embodying a twentieth century antiracist comic tradition largely ignored today, Frankie Howerd’s 1968 *Othello* undermined racist images by distorting and deconstructing blackface and racist singing, yet in 1974 he “blacks up” to achieve the same antiracist goal in *Francis Howerd in Concert*. As in 1968, a preview newspaper article distances “the lovable Frankie” from racism, blaming writer Johnny Speight who Howerd claims “likes to be controversial” (Sayer 18/9/74). Howerd presents *Othello* in blackface as a Variety double act in a 10.5-minute sketch with Iago played by black British actor and singer Kenny Lynch.

Much of the sketch concerns Frankie’s diegetically failed attempts to modernise *Othello* using outdated Variety gags and racist one-liners. He begins, “we’re going to do a really funny item for you now, a funny item. It’s a ‘Boom! Boom,’” which references the percussion a Variety drummer would use to cue audience laughter (Double 2012). By too quickly and far too often invoking this “Boom! Boom!” cue without a corresponding joke, Howerd minimises audience mirth. Known as a consummate conductor of audience laughter (Medhurst 2007; McCann 2004; Ross 2001), Howerd’s “failure” to evoke modern comedy or laughter at racist jokes and performances emerges in this way as self-reflexive irony. By framing the character within such an outdated tradition, the sketch suggests that conventional responses to blackface Othello are outdated. Moreover, the sketch interrupts a traditional response, forestalling the audience’s ability to enjoy the “pleasures” of racial drag apparently offered by “blacked up” actors. As Elise Marks develops, Othello normally serves as a psychosexual fantasy figure of unrestrained emotion and/or sexuality (Marks 2001: 117) for white audiences “consuming” the spectacle of both real and imagined black bodies.

Not unlike Variety scions Morecambe and Wise locating any and all things within the world of British Variety (Hamrick 2020), Speight further frustrates conventional responses to a “blackened up” Othello by placing the blackface paragon Olivier within the same context. In the sketch, Howerd cites Olivier’s favourite film role, which depicts the death of Variety, yelling, “this is *The Entertainer*. We’re trying to modernise it, get some ‘Boom! Boom!’ You see, Concert, that’s it. Swinging. Review” (Lawrence 18/9/74). Playing the Variety comedian character, Howerd continues by saying, “I saw that, you know, what’s his name? Sir Laurence Olivier at the Old Vic. Oh, jabber, jabber, jabber, I mean, you won’t take a penny with this at Blackpool” (Lawrence 18/9/74). Comically shifting from the ostensibly “high culture” venue of the “Old Vic” to Blackpool’s working class ambit, Olivier functions within the comedians’ incongruous fiction to undermine Shakespeare as unprofitably “wordy” (ibid.) or to recall the racist stereotype of the Black man as inarticulate (see Watkins 1999). The anarchic overlap of performance genres (drama, concert, swing, review) prevents easy audience response to the “blackened up” comedian.

Howerd again denies the audience’s expectations of blackface, further signalling his rejection of racist blackface traditions. As he notes, “you see, when you black up, people expect some good entertainment, don’t they. Some very good stuff. You know, ah, “the sun shines east, the sun shines west, I know where the sun shines best... Scunthorpe!” (Lawrence 18/9/74). Once more derailing standard racist expectations of “My Mammy,” Howerd interjects “Scunthorpe,” the largest steel processing centre in the UK (Broadbent 2017), which reimagines “My Mammy’s” delusionally idyllic plantation community as an industrial landscape. When Howerd later sings the song and dances in double-act unison with Lynch, comic actor John Le Mesurier interrupts the racist performance, declaiming *Richard III*’s, “Now is the winter of our discontent” (1.1.1). Mixing plays, genres, and slapstick, the sketch fashions a carnivalesque chaos, positively displacing the racist use of Shakespeare, blackface, and “Mammy.”

Lynch’s performance as a “whited up” Iago undermines the racism of the Othello sketch and the use of blackface performance further. Howerd asks, “Where’s the comedy feed,” superimposing tragedy and comedy in a standard Shakespop move. Lynch enters in “whiteface” (see Figure 3), delivering, “Oh noble Lord Othello, ’tis I Iago, your faithful lieutenant.”



Figure 3. *Francis Howerd in Concert*. ITV 18/9/74.

Audience laughter underscores the powerful impact of Lynch’s “whited up” Iago contrasting Howerd’s “blackened up” Othello. Howerd frames the inverted spectacle, declaring,

FH: You look more like a flour-grader to me. You stand there looking like a negative. I mean what's all this business here? [touching his chin] What's this?

KL: Well I, I thought it would give me motivation.

FH: It'll give you acne. I'll tell you that much.

(Lawrence 18/9/74)

Unlike MP Ronald Bell, who had used flour four years earlier to undermine the possibility of a Black actress effectively impersonating a white woman, here Speight and fellow scriptwriter Barry Cryer deploy “whiteface,” the profession of the “flour-grader,” and the photographic simile of Lynch looking “like a negative” to undermine traditional racist readings of blackface Othello. In a photo “negative,” image colours reverse into corresponding hues, the lightest areas of images become the darkest, and vice versa. Within this scripted simile, Lynch as a “whited up” Black Briton matches Howerd as a “blacked up” white Briton. The image of “whited up” Lynch-Iago creates cognitive dissonance and thus the need for an interpretive context with which to understand the unfamiliar color-coding. Lynch’s diegetic search for actorly “motivation” reflects back upon Howerd’s own motivations for donning blackface. This disruptive questioning of meanings and motivations magnifies the sketch’s consistent alienation of audiences from blackface. “Whited up,” Lynch’s startling colouration serves as a kind of meta-theatrical mirror that leads viewers to see Howerd’s “blacked up” image as disfiguring, as scarring much like the acne produced by greasepaint makeup.

Further alienating audiences, the Variety character’s attempts to combine a Variety double act with tragedy includes using racist epithets. After the comic Lynch-Iago corrects the Variety-comedian character, informing him that Othello did not possess a hump or a Long John Silver crutch deployed by Frankie, Howerd complains, “Isn’t it marvelous?” Pointing at Lynch, he continues, “Hardly down out of the trees, and he’s already an expert on Shakespeare” (Lawrence 18/9/74)? Although Lynch corpses at the racist joke, in referring to Lynch as a monkey coming “down out of the trees,” Howerd’s Variety character replicates the racist slurs hurled by thousands of racist football hooligans throwing bananas and bellowing “monkey chants” at Black players throughout the 1970s (Garland & Rowe 2001).

Rejecting the racism of dehumanising blackface performance, the ending of the 1974 sketch reverses such racist marginalisation of Black Britons as “monkeys” and “coons.” Playing Desdemona, Norwegian actress Julie Ege reads from a tiny script she removes from her very low-cut, cleavage-accentuating bodice, saying, “Hello Sambo.” Howerd responds,

FH: Look dear, I don’t know what they do in Sweden, but in England we do not address our coloured friends like that. You see?

JE: In the script, it says, “when Julie meets coon, she says, ‘Hello Sambo.’”

FH: It’s that bloody Johnny Speight again! You see? He will, knock, knock. All the gags, all the crudities, you see. Don’t blame me. Blame Johnny Speight.

(Lawrence 18/9/74)

Recalling Olivier’s Othello, the racist slurs “Sambo” and “coon” present racist stereotypes of Black men as sexually threatening.

Since the 1974 sketch presents Ege as hypersexual (and not much more), Lynch “must” structurally serve as the sexual aggressor within the racist narratives evoked by the slurs “Sambo” and “coon.” Correspondingly, the early 1970s constitute what Donald Bogle defines as the “age of the buck” (2003: 232), a time when Hollywood-derived stereotypes of Black men as predators circulated widely. As the “brutal buck,” an “oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied” monster with a “lust for white flesh” (ibid. 14), such a racist caricature echoes earlier images used by Enoch Powell and *The Times*. Lynch’s distinct failure to embody this threatening stereotype, however, starkly contrasts Ege’s use of “coon,” which Bogle identifies as

“the most blatantly degrading of black stereotypes... unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language” (ibid. 8). As a controlling image designed to neuter the “buck’s” Black masculinity, verbal dexterity, and sexuality, then, the coon stereotype jars harshly with Lynch’s competent and empowered performance. “Sambo” also represents Black men as dense or stupid (Watkins 1999) and, combined with “the shiftless coon,” ostensibly degrades and dehumanises Lynch as a non-threat rather than a powerful “buck.”

In 1974, such racist language appealed to members of the then-growing fascist National Front (NF) who clashed with anti-fascists in central London in June. This racist violence resulted in the first death at a political demonstration in fifty-five years. The NF fomented racist violence, claiming to fight in a “global struggle for survival between various species of humanity,” asking, “white man, are you ready to fight” (Sandbrook 2012: 582)? Decidedly advancing Powell’s race war, white supremacists deployed such racist terms freely, labelling Black Britons “Sambo,” Congolese for “monkey” (Boskin 1988; cf. Nixon 17/6/95), “coon,” and other racist slurs, casting them as a lesser “species” than the “white man.”

Rather than ending as the antiracist progressive, the Variety comedian character ends as the marginalised outsider, distancing viewers from the “blackened up” figure and his racism. Effectively lambasting the racist and unfunny Variety character, Le Mesurier addresses the “whited up” Lynch, “now tell me, don’t you agree that sometimes these; some of our [clears his throat] these, ah, coloured people [looking at Howerd] get awfully aggressive, sometimes? Don’t you find that?” Exiting together, Lynch replies in cool and collected tones, “They do, they do. They always do” (Lawrence 18/9/74). In characterizing Howerd as the marginalised outsider who gets “awfully aggressive,” the sketch ironizes the contemporary British myth of “the black as a trouble-maker” (Barry 1988: 87) and the practice that avoids employing Black actors because Black characters, including “bucks,” “make trouble” or represent problems in “black” narratives (Malik 2002: 141).

Due to his racist comments, however, Howerd’s Variety comedian character becomes the butt of the sketch and the marginalised minority who always makes “trouble,” which again undermines simplistic notions of twentieth century blackface comedy as only racist. Since “Black and Asian people were continually constructed” in 1970s British television “as inherently worth laughing at, as exotic, and, ultimately, as outsiders” (Schaffer 2017: 188), Howerd’s final position as the laughable outsider inverts racial hierarchies. Unable to understand the racism of blackface, Howerd’s Variety comedian character resembles the racist comic Archie Rice who remained unable to accept the death of Variety or his own irrelevance in *The Entertainer* (Richardson 1960), which Howerd dubbed his “modern” Variety act at the start. The sketch ending rejects Rice’s racism and his bad acting; later *Othello* sketches deploy the comedy of bad acting without addressing racism (Harris 9/2/80; Harris 30/3/86).

4. Carry on Othello

Unlike Howerd’s use of blackface images to reject racist portrayals of Black men in the last quarter of the twentieth century, the long-running sketch show *The Two Ronnies* (BBC 1971-1987) presents an implicitly racist, 4-minute 1986 sketch in which an Elizabethan milkman discusses a Cockney Shakespeare’s work with the playwright. Asking the erudite milkman, Ronnie Barker, to examine his work, Ronnie Corbett as Shakespeare hands the highly educated dairy specialist a manuscript.

Ronnie Barker: *Carry on Othello*.

Ronnie Corbett: Good title, don’t you think?

RB: It lacks class. I mean, the main character, Othello, does he have to be a bookies runner?

RC: No, no, no. He could be a pork butcher, something like that. A social worker, something like that.
RB: No. No. I think you miss the point entirely, sir. No. No. He should be a romantic, a romantic soldier, perchance.
RC: Well, what 'cha mean, Sergeant-major Othello in charge of the cookhouse, something like that?
RB: If you want to make it more avant-garde, he could be coloured.
RC: That's a good idea, good idea. Change the title. "*Chocolate Solider*," we could call it. There's a joke in there, as a matter of fact.
RB: A joke?
RC: Yes, a bit of a joke, a bit of a gag, you see. Someone in the audience could shout out: "Sing us a bit from *The Chocolate Soldier*," you see? Then Othello could say, "which bit"? And the lady would shout back, "the bit with the nuts in."

(Mortimer 11/1/86)

Their previous blackface characterisations (e.g. 22/5/71; 20/2/75; 10/12/83; Stewart 6/10/67; Rosenthal 2019; Corbett 2000) notwithstanding, the use of *Carry on Othello*, *The Chocolate Soldier*, and the genital or "nuts" joke returns audiences to the image of the Black or "chocolate" man as the hypersexual "buck" by focusing on his genitalia. An operetta and a 1941 film (Del Ruth), *The Chocolate Soldier* here becomes part of the racist tradition of depicting Othello as hypersexual. Although Newcastle schools would use the "racist content" in *Othello* and other texts to teach kids about racism (Steel 5/2/86), the contemporary sketch lacks such didactic, antiracist goals.

At the same time that the 1986 *Two Ronnies* sketch normalises Othello as a married man, it further deploys the racist stereotype of the hypersexual Black man. When Barker-Milkman suggests adding "a *soupçon* of sex," Corbett-Shakespeare reports on "Mrs. Othello: Gladys, nee Ponsford, married twenty-seven years, eleven children, twelfth on the way. I mean, I think you have to admit, in the 'how's your father' department, Othello is quite tasty." The ribaldly potent and simultaneously edible masculinity of "tasty" Othello siring twelve children, combined with the carnivalesque sexuality of the beloved *Carry On* films (Medhurst 2007), contorts the image of the "Chocolate Soldier" as oversexed. With the additional racist resonances of G. H. Elliott, "the Chocolate Coloured Coon," a blackface minstrel active until the early 1960s (Hudd & Hindin 1997), the racist image of the hypersexual Other served up as a "tasty" consumable echoes in the sketch.

Extending such racism, another racist *Othello* sketch deploys blackface performance as a coded political attack on the international racial Other. In May 1990, the BBC launched "KYTV," a sitcom set in a satellite television station. Incidental to the plot, a 1-minute preview of the station's "classic season" of Shakespeare functions as a sketch that includes a racist blackface *Othello*. Initially, with Danny La Rue as Lady Macbeth and the Beverly Sisters singing "hurly burly" as the witches, Scottish singer Kenneth McKellar as Macbeth croons of "the battle lost and won," surrealistically elevated in a tree (Kilby 3/5/90). The preview switches to a picture of Black comic actor Gary Wilmot as the voice-over informs viewers that daft comedy actress Sue Pollard will star as Wilmot's Desdemona. Cutting to a candle-lit bedroom, a *keffiyeh*-clad white actor in blackface strangles Desdemona, violently slamming her repeatedly onto the bed.

Briefly on screen, the violent performance nevertheless recalls both racist blackface minstrels and sketch comedians using Othello to display and dehumanise the "animalistic" Black body through song and dance. In KYTV's preview of "the very best of drama" (Kilby 3/5/90) the scene from *Othello* stands out as a "preposterously violent" spectacle familiar to blackface minstrelsy and Shakespop comedy. The sketch reinforces the strangeness of the moment by visually contrasting the assault on Desdemona to the domestic culture represented

by the Beverly Sisters and McKellar. The unified harmonies and avuncular tones offer a comforting nostalgia connected to the Second World War and “traditional” Scotland, respectively. The white walls, white bedding, and the white, long *keffiyeh*, an Arabian headdress, all serve as a visually stark backdrop that accentuates white Othello’s blackface makeup. In this fashion, Othello serves as a screen upon which to project contemporary racial anxieties.

In the midst of the first Intifada (1987-1993), *KYTV*’s distinctly framed Arabian Othello wearing a *keffiyeh* recalls the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in terms familiar to the popular press (Sanz Sabido 2019). In the four months before the 3 May 1990 episode of *KYTV*, the British press largely represented the conflict as caused by the Palestinians, positioning them as the Other (e.g. *The Times* 2/1/1990, 2; 7/4/90, 7; *Daily Mirror* 14/3/90, 2). As a rhetoric used more aggressively by the Neoconservative binarism of “the clash of civilisations” (Fekte 2014), *KYTV*’s vilification of an Arab blackface Othello corresponds closely, through the combination of blackface and *keffiyeh*, to the new cultural racism based on more than skin colour (Modood 2005). Here, this Othello represents an early embodiment of British Muslimophobia deployed three months prior to the First American War in the Persian Gulf to which the United Kingdom supplied more troops than any other European power (Schwartz 2015). If ironic, the violent images nevertheless deploy blackface to racist effect.

Late twentieth century sketch comedy demonstrably includes such racist uses of blackface, yet throughout the period comedians also consistently offer antiracist comedy that employs blackface performance and *Othello* to combat racial bigotry.

5. Othello was Black

Analysis of two sketches that counter the racism of blackface performances, from *The Real McCoy* (BBC 1991-1996) and *Goodness Gracious Me* (BBC 1998-2001), will usefully close this study of racism and *Othello* sketch comedy. Writer, comedian, and star of *The Real McCoy*, Meera Syal notes that as “the only comedy sketch show on TV that features a black and Asian cast,” the show is “enlightening to white people who get to see our view of the world” (ibid.). Syal also recognises, “the most interesting material is now coming from people on the so-called fringes of society” (Shenna, 1993). Syal’s re-centering of “our view,” rather than leaving it on “the so-called fringes of society,” serves as one of the 1990s’ “creative interventions” (Malik 2017: 94; cf. Barry 1988) enacted by Black and Asian British comedians within the still-racist context of broadcast television. Taking Othello’s outsider status as a focal point, *The Real McCoy*, described generally as “blazing a seriously funny multicultural trail” (Barden, 1993), filters such marginalisation through the experience of Black British immigrant communities, deploying a Black actor as Othello to antiracist effect.

In what amounts to a “comic attack on racism” (cf. Gillespie 2003), Black comedian and actor Leo Chester deploys *Othello* in a 2.7-minute 1993 sketch that empowers Black Britons. Chester-Othello strangles white actress Alexandra Gilbreath as Desdemona when an officious Caucasian man enters. Screened less than a month before adoption of the 1993 Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act, the immigration officer brandishes his clipboard as a symbolic weapon.

Alexandra Gilbreath: Oh banish me, my lord, but kill me not.

Leo Chester: Down strumpet!

John Collins: Ahem. Erm, Mr. Othello?

LC: What do you want?

JC: Mr. Othello Moor? I have a warrant here authorising your deportation. I shall have to ask you to come with me.

LC: Is this some kind of joke?

JC: I'm afraid not, sir. No, under the 1993 Asylum and Immigration Act, [booing and hissing from audience] you are now considered an illegal alien.

AG: This is ridiculous. [exits]

JC: No, no, no, sir. Here it is, "Mr. Othello, Moor." According to our records, you have been living in this country for the last 375 years without a visa.

(Jarvis 4/6/93)

As the audible booing and hissing of *The Real McCoy* audience suggest, the deportation of Black immigrants from the UK before and after the 1993 Act remained a serious concern. Although the number of deportation cases grew from 10,370 to 16,460 in the period 1993-1995, appeals in the same period decreased from 29,220 to 21,810; those actually deported dropped from 6,080 to 5,080 persons (Blunket 2002). In any case, the hyperbolic absurdity of "375 years without a visa" underscores the fact that Othello's outsider status parallels many Black immigrants in *The Real McCoy's* audience familiar or threatened with deportation.

Engaging racist attitudes directly, *The Real McCoy* uses the National Theatre to counter xenophobia and the absurdity of forced and racism-motivated repatriation. Chester-Othello says,

LC: This is absurd. For God's sake, we're on stage at the National Theatre.

JC: Yes, precisely. The BRITISH National Theatre. [booing from the audience] No place for your sort here. We're taking you home.

(Jarvis 4/6/93)

Undoing the racist Othering of the exclusionary "your sort," the emblematically British (and Shakespearean) National Theatre remains the domain of a Black Briton commanding the role of Othello and the Caucasian racist attempting to police "British" so-called "superiority." "British" also recalls Enoch Powell's representation of Black as a "national danger" in 1968. Such an image refutes the racist stereotype of the cowardly and inarticulate Black clown discussed above, which white actors reinforced by playing the Moor "blacked up," and which Rowan Atkinson's time travelling Blackadder echoes in attacking Shakespeare, because "here comes Othello talking total crap as usual" (Weiland 6/12/99). Not unlike Powell, the press and politicians in 1992 and 1993 refer to "a besieged Britain" overrun by "sponging, culturally alien hordes" (qtd. in Hayes 2002: 42). Such images reinforce racist conceptions of the Other, which *The Real McCoy* counters comically through the empowered Black actor.

The sketch ends with an empowered Black British voice that rejects the use of Othello as a racist image yet recognises that black, Asian, and other Britons still face violent xenophobia and racism. Unwilling to continue, Leo Chester says,

LC: All right, all right, look, this has gone far enough. You cannot deport Othello, you ignoramus, because he doesn't exist. He is a fictional character in a play, a figment of Shakespeare's imagination.

JC: So, erm, you're not really Othello, then?

LC: That's right. I'm an actor, playing a part. My real name is Derek.

JC: Derek? And you're not from Venice?

LC: No. Stockwell, actually.

(Jarvis 4/6/93)

Home to a thriving community of African-Caribbean immigrants and Black Britons, the reference to Stockwell in North London repositions the voice of Shakespearean authority to a location normally marginalised by the kind of racism offered by blackface versions of *Othello*. Undermining the white "authority" figure and depicting deportation as absurd or ridiculous,

Chester informs the bigoted white man that as a “figment of Shakespeare’s imagination,” Othello cannot be deported. Nor can racists remove him or other blackface performances from the uses of Black and Asian Britons (cf. Marshall 2019: 2020).

Enacting a comic reformation of Othello, Leo Chester, a Black Briton, deploys the national Black Shakespearean archetype against racists like Powell and contemporary parliamentarians. In replacing a “blacked up” Othello with a Black actor who refuses to accept racist stereotypes and racist practices, *The Real McCoy* rewrites and rejects the racist blackface tradition in comic sketches and in Shakespearean performances.

Again rejecting racist performance traditions, a 3-minute sketch from *Goodness Gracious Me* (BBC 1998-2001) deploys song, dance, and historical images of blackface to unabashedly anti-racist ends. Critics have praised *Goodness Gracious Me* as a ground-breaking sketch comedy series, which brought Asian-Britons more fully into British culture, offering some “recognition of the diversities of Englishness” (Polley 2004: 16-17; cf. Ellis 2000). The comic ensemble perform a song and dance routine dressed as agents from the science fiction blockbuster *Men in Black* (Sonnenfeld 1997). “The Blacked-Up Men” routine uses a synthesis of adult contemporary music and rap to deconstruct British blackface performance history and contemporary racial comedy, punning on “Men in Black(*face*)” adroitly.

Naming Al Jolson, Laurence Olivier, Alec Guinness, and Orson Wells, as well as the BBC’s *Black and White Minstrels*, the members of *Goodness Gracious Me* sing and expose the disfiguring realities of blackface Othello and others, projecting those blackface performers’ visages onto the television screen to break those racist icons. For *Goodness*, Jolson provides only “what we call the minstrel pains” as he “insulted a race” (cf. Musser 2011); the homophonic minstrel/menstrual pains of the lyrics metaphorically suggest that Jolson’s “blacked up” racism causes pain and that it returns periodically. Notably, the comedians also expel Olivier’s continued and scarring presence, unmasking “the great white dope blacked-up to play the great Moor, forgetting the fact that Othello was black and not a fat white man covered in cack” (Plowman 27/11/98). Not unlike *The Real McCoy*’s deployment Black Briton Leo Chester, here “the fact that Othello was black” uses the general’s materiality to point up and belittle the scatological artifice constituting the tradition of blackface performance. This statement also returns attention to Frankie Howerd’s 1968 *Othello* sketch, which depicted Cilla Black stating, “Othello was black” in order to compel her host to “black up” and, counterintuitively, to reject racism as Chester has thirty years later.

Such an exposé also responds to contemporary racial politics and sketch comedy. Writing on the Human Rights Act (1998) five months earlier, for instance, *The Times* characteristically deploys Othello to warn, “Race laws may be extended to Shakespeare” (10/6/98, 6). Printing a still from *Othello* (1965), they caption, “No Moor: a blacked-up Olivier playing Othello.” Perhaps speaking of *The Times*, yet clearly speaking to racist tradition, “The Blacked-Up Men’s” refrain aptly rejects the performers’ “strange agendas.” *Goodness’ Othello* sketch also responds to presenter Harry Hill who had produced a brief advert sketch on *The Albino Black and White Minstrels Show* for a faux “Albino Night” on Channel 4 (20/11/1998) only a week earlier. Perhaps responding to Hill’s minstrels as insufficiently critical of racist blackface performances, the song ends, asking provocatively, if blackface remains acceptable, “just let a black guy white-up and play Jesus” (ibid). In fact, Kenny Lynch had “whited up” with Frankie Howerd in 1974 to provoke viewers and reject blackface racism as well.

The Real McCoy had harshly ridiculed racist attacks on Black “aliens” by white immigration officials, and five years later the cast of *Goodness Gracious Me* pick up where *McCoy* left off. Where the agents of *Men in Black* remain uniquely aware of and responsible for proactively combatting extra-terrestrial threats to the planet, the cast of *Goodness* become “real-life” alien hunters who track down dangerous “bugs,” or racist performances, and destroy them. Capturing the “Blacked Up Men,” the *Gracious* agents relegate the tradition of blackface

minstrels, blackface *Othello*, and other blackface performers to historical oblivion. These racists ironically become precisely the “alien element” that Enoch Powell vilified in his 1968 “Rivers of Blood” speech and Frankie Howerd portrayed in his 1974 *Othello* sketch. Notably, both *The Real McCoy* and *Goodness* recognise the stupidity of such racist representations, thereby inverting the racist stereotype of the “stupid” Black man.

Written into British law and into British sketch comedy, *Othello* continues to circulate as a contested figure, evoking issues of racism, nationalism, and Black masculinity. Rather than simply a figure of atavistic racism, blackface *Othello* functions as a figure of critical humour, allowing comedians to displace the racist ideas, figures, and national institutions surrounding Shakespeare. Although sketch comedy may not “laugh its way out of racism,” the tradition of British sketch comedy recovered here should be seen as “working through” cultural changes surrounding race and racism (Barry 1988: 94; Ellis 2000). The removal of blackface performances from video catalogues in 2020 aptly countered the dehumanising racism of some sketch comedy, yet the foregoing analysis demonstrates that late twentieth century comedians also used images of blackface *Othello* in antiracist humour.

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