For mine owne part, when I heare the Africans evil spoken of, I wil affirme myselfe to be one of Granada; and when I perceive the nation of Granada to be discommended, then will I professe my selfe to be an African.

Leo Africanus, *A Geographical Historie of Africa* (1600)

On 13 May 1888, Princess Isabel, Regent of the Empire of Brazil, signed into law the emancipation of all slaves in the country, and masses of her subjects took to the streets of Rio de Janeiro to celebrate. Two years later, Brazilians, now under a provisional republican government, witnessed another momentous event in the history of African slavery. On 14 December 1890, Rui Barbosa, Minister of Finance and Internal Affairs, ordered a thorough search of the archives that had been kept by the Portuguese colonial authorities and later by the Imperial government. All records pertaining to slavery were to be located and burned. Barbosa hoped to remove a blot from the national character. If, as Michel de Certeau suggests, ‘writing produces history,’ then Barbosa single-handedly succeeded in wiping out much of the history of millions of Brazilians of African descent.

This experience has an ideological precedent in an account written in 1453, at the dawn of the Atlantic slave trade. The Portuguese chronicler Gomes Eanes de Azurara recorded the capture of the first African slaves and the ideology that justified it. In a passage quoted earlier, Azurara remarked that ‘after they [the Africans] had come to this land of Portugal, they never more tried to fly, but rather in time forgot all about their own country, as soon as they began to taste the good things of this one.’ Barbosa and Azurara apparently differ in their intentions: the actions of one derive from embarrassment for his country’s past; whereas the actions of the other stem from arrogant and Eurocentric self-confidence. Yet Barbosa and Azurara...
converge in their belief that the comforts of Europe or the bonfires of the newly proclaimed Brazilian Republic would obliterate the cultural and historical memory of the African slaves. Undoubtedly, without memory, only puzzled faces, feeling a profound sense of displacement, would remain.

This chapter focuses on cross-cultural encounters as dramatic fictions in which Africans communicate a profound sense of cultural displacement in *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello*. As they interact with members of European cultures, Aaron and Othello function as displaced representatives from geographically remote and culturally exotic places. These two characters, however, have incomplete, partial, or no cultural memory and, therefore, contrast with Europeans, who are embroiled in historical enterprises. Their presence invites ethnographical recovery and reconstruction. Shakespeare situates his African characters at the intersections of European and alien cultures, dramatizing what Claude Lévi-Strauss refers to as 'the problem of writing the history of a present without a past.'

My discussion will center first on *Titus Andronicus* and then on *Othello*.

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Lévi-Strauss argues that both history and anthropology share a common goal, 'a better understanding of man'; he adds, however, that 'They differ, principally, in their choice of complementary perspectives: History organizes its data in relation to conscious expressions of social life, while anthropology proceeds by examining its unconscious foundations.' In *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare pursues these complementary perspectives in his portrayal of a Moor displaced in the Roman culture. The Romans make history and celebrate a collective act of remembering; and even Tamora, a white woman and a prisoner of war, enters the public life of Rome. Aaron, however, has no memory and cannot participate in the making of history; rather, he epitomizes the unconscious foundation of an ethnographical fantasy that his presence generates.

In his edition, Gustav Cross calls *Titus Andronicus* ‘a ridiculous play,’ nothing more than a ‘gallimaufry of murders, rapes, lopped limbs, and heads baked in a pie, lavishly served with the rich purple sauce of rhetoric.’ In *Palladis Tamia: Wit’s Treasury* (1598), Francis Meres, however, praised *Titus Andronicus* as ‘our best for Tragedie’ and lamented that greater plays could have been written if patrons