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In Defense of the "Moor": Race, Racism, and Violence in *Othello* and *O*

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Abstract

Though some scholars have begun to doubt Shakespeare's position as a staple of the Western literary canon, reevaluating his writings in light of current events creates a clearer picture regarding such a status. Othello presents itself as a highly relevant example to confront such issues. As the BLM protests have highlighted historical inequities among Black people, reassessing this play demonstrates deep similarities between early modern and contemporary conceptions of race and racism: that they are based on geography and skin color. Analyzing Othello shows a play reflecting Britain's anxieties regarding their place in the world as a burgeoning hegemonic power. Through language, stereotypes, manipulation, violence, and the broader power of white hegemony, Venice constricts Othello into the figure they believe him to be: of an enemy, a brute, a sexual menace, and a liability to security.

The same scholarship challenging Shakespeare further encourages us to reconsider how adaptations convey his works. Tim Blake Nelson's O (2001), as I shall argue, upholds this same legacy Othello started, of projecting whiteness as this hegemonic force. As O shows, the movie does not holistically challenge racism and white supremacy. Specifically, Nelson depicts Odin (or Othello) as a stereotypical, racist portrait of how Americans perceive Black men as dangerous not only to those around them, but also to the white hegemony that constricts them into these norms. By following Othello's plot too closely, it is problematic with the image of the Black body. Thus, the movie becomes what Othello is: a racist, grueling work that celebrates the triumph of whiteness over Blackness.

The legacy of race, racism, and violence's intersection continues to influence how we perceive and respond to these atrocities. William Shakespeare, a staple of the Western literary canon, provides a base through which we may understand these factors. Whereas medieval discrimination tended to focus on religious difference, by the time Shakespeare was writing, at the onset of Britain's colonization of the world, race and racism were beginning to take on their contemporary definitions: defining difference through geography and skin color. Additionally, using Shakespeare to investigate race falls in line with scholarship challenging his presence and domination as a writer in Western literature. Ian Smith, in "We Are Othello: Speaking of Race in Early Modern Studies," explains that race "must be understood as a 'thick description,' not the merely 'thin' or superficial reference to decontextualized skin color, that can disrupt and deter dialogue and understanding" (114). To speak about race in Shakespeare is to treat it as the significant, highly nuanced category it is. To go further and speak about racism, then, is to not only recognize the presence of race in Shakespeare's plays, but also to confront—and fight against—these manifestations of bigotry in his works.

Othello presents itself as a standout example to

continue this dialogue surrounding Shakespeare's problems. It is a play steeped in racism, white supremacy, and the extent to which these factors influence violence. To supplement this dialogue of racism's legacy, I will also explore the film adaptation *O*, directed by Tim Blake Nelson, which presents a rather nuanced, complicated vision of *Othello* set amongst teens in a 21st-century, South Carolina prep school. Ultimately, this paper will articulate the intersections of race, racism, and violence in *Othello* and *O*, and then evaluate the extent to which *O* challenges conceptions of race and racism. As I shall argue, race, racism, and violence percolate into a defining, highly systematic, and degenerative component of Venetian society. Further, *O* upholds similar messages of whiteness prevailing over Blackness. It becomes, simply, an adaptation of *Othello* that does not seek to challenge racism and violence in America. Its stylistic choices muddle its intentions to explore and critique violence. The movie's problems lie in how closely it follows the source material in relation to its American setting. Thus, *O* not only reinforces racist stereotypes, but it also defends America's inherent white supremacy.

Many scholars have written about race, racism, and violence in both *Othello* and *O*. However, scholars tend to treat this trio as separate entities. Janet Adelman, in "Iago's Alter Ego: Race as Projection in *Othello*," proves to be an exception. She argues that "although the play locates Othello in a deeply racist society, the sense of pollution attaching to blackness comes first of all … from Iago," additionally writing that it "offers us an equally rich—and in some ways more disturbing—representation of the function of Othello's race *for Iago*" (126). In other words, Iago is the perpetrator of Othello's self-loathing of his race, which fuels violence against himself. In a similar vein, Emily C. Bartels, in "Making more of the Moor: Aaron, Othello, and Renaissance Refashionings of Race," takes a New Historicist approach to her analysis: "While blackness and Mohammedism were stereotyped as evil, Renaissance representations of the Moor were vague, varied, inconsistent, and contradictory" (434). Further, "the Moor was characterized alternately and sometimes simultaneously in contradictory extremes, as noble or monstrous, civil or savage" (434). In a way, Bartels suggests that Othello's identity is fluid insofar as the hegemonic culture controls his identity. These sources will act as my guide in exploring race and racism in the play. Further, I will supplement their analyses with specific examples from *Othello*. This task will provide a leveled understanding of how early modern conceptions of race and racism manifest among the Venetians, and they will also work as links to how these problems embed themselves in the play's violence.

Detailing the violence in *Othello*, Jennifer Feather, in "'O blood, blood, blood': Violence and Identity in Shakespeare's *Othello*," uses the early modern definition of blood to mean "rank, culture, and identity itself" (240). By doing so, she argues that "blood and the violence it connotes is a flexible form of self-fashioning that Othello uses to repair his understanding of the world shattered by Desdemona's purported infidelity and to negotiate this tension between stability and fluidity" (240). Broadly, all these sources combined revolve around Kim F. Hall's "'Commerce and Intercourse': Dramas of Alliance and Trade," where she writes that "the appearance of blackness in plays responds to growing concerns over English national identity and culture when England develops political and economic ties with foreign (and 'racially' different) nations" (125). Taken together, these sources provide a grounded understanding of my reading—about the nuanced manifestations of race and racism leading to violence. I hope my analysis can bridge these gaps in the current scholarship and demonstrate that these issues are intertwined and work simultaneously with one another.

Scholarship on *O*'s portrayals of race and racism—and their connections to violence—remains somewhat scarce; those that

discuss it tend to treat it as secondhand to the plot. Laura Reitz-Wilson, in "Race and Othello on Film," posits that it "seems to finally capture the balance Shakespeare intended between portraying Othello as an other, based on his race, and the problem of stereotyping a black character" (7). She believes that *O* is "pedagogically useful" in exploring race and racism, a point to which I will return (Reitz-Wilson 1). Concerning the film's teen setting, Gregory M. Colón Semenza, in "Shakespeare after Columbine: Teen Violence in Tim Blake Nelson's '*O*,'" deconstructs the intersections of teen violence and its depictions and responses in mass media. Ultimately, he argues that "[b]y juxtaposing popular interpretations of adolescent criminality as the result either of a natural depravity in teens or a profound psychosocial immaturity, … the film explores how much problems as racism, family abuse, peer ostracism, and countless other factors *combine* to make the turn of the century such a terrible time for many American teenagers" (101). The film is, in his words, a study of the factors contributing to teen violence. Rather than blame violent video games or movies, Semenza looks organically at how teen violence manifests and exposes itself. Finally, Vanessa Corredera, in "Far More Black than Black: Stereotypes, Black Masculinity, and Americanization in Tim Blake Nelson's *O*," takes a nuanced approach to race and racism in *O*, suggesting that "the film trades in and ultimately reifies malignant American fantasies—both historical and modern—about black men that overwhelm the film's attempts at positive representation" (Corredera). Essentially, Corredera's analysis challenges the images of Odin on screen, arguing that his depictions only harm the fight for racial justice. My analysis will additionally work to supplement hers.

Using language as a tool for violence, Iago's and Roderigo's depictions of Othello begin the racist othering of Othello, of fashioning him as the Other to Venice. In this case, he is the ostracized outsider to Venice's white hegemony. The play does not even begin with Othello, but rather with Iago and Roderigo echoing racist diatribes against him. The first mention of Othello, for example, is not even as his name, but rather as a Moor: "Now, sir, be judge yourself / Whether I in any just term am affined / To love the Moor" (1.1.39-41). Recall that Moor has multiple, contradictory meanings—from "civil" to "savage" (Bartels 434). However, the hegemonic culture—in this case, white-dominated Venice—dictates its meaning. "Moor," then, is Iago's first attempt at othering Othello, to relegate him to a label rather than a person. Roderigo continues this horrific othering by calling Othello "the thick-lips," using a racist stereotype to refer to him (1.1.68). In echoing such a stereotype, Roderigo simply serves to reinforce Iago's racism. He is a confirmation of Iago's racism, an echo chamber in which Iago's thoughts can roam free and dangerously develop. Iago continues his diatribes by alerting Brabantio that he is "robbed," that his "heart is burst," and that "half [his] soul" is lost" (1.1.87-89). He then clarifies that "an old black ram / Is tupping [Brabantio's] white ewe," speaking specifically of Othello and Desdemona (1.1.91-92). Framing the robbery of Desdemona through sexual promiscuity, Iago grounds his understanding of Othello as a sexual menace. Speaking of him as a testosterone-driven "black ram" invokes the stereotype of Black men as violent towards white women. Additionally, he turns Othello "into a black monster, invading the citadel of whiteness," suggesting he is a displaced, liminal character, furthering his position as the Other (Adelman 129). Feather also explicates that "Brabantio makes no distinction between theft, assault, and miscegenation," perhaps lumping them together as a crime against the whiteness about which Adelman speaks (247). Against such accusations, Brabantio's mobilization must not be taken lightly. He tells Iago and Roderigo to "Call up all my people! / This accident is not unlike my dream. / Belief of it oppresses me already," foreshadowing a monumental trial of whiteness against Blackness (1.1.145-47). As Adelman ex-

plains, "Iago legitimizes and intensifies Brabantio's racism through his initial sexualizing and racializing invocation of Othello" (126). Iago, in other words, pursues a threatening image of Othello for Venice to adopt, one that pits him as an enemy to the Venetian state. The threat of the "Moor" is not overseas in Turkey—rather, it is at the footsteps of Venice, and it is a threat Brabantio must swiftly punish.

His trial against Othello reinforces Othello's position in Venetian society as the Other. His mere presence at the trial spells violence teetering on the brink of tragedy: Iago alerts Brabantio that Othello "comes to bad intent," and then Iago, Brabantio, Roderigo, and Cassio draw swords against Othello, wary that the Black general would have done so, too (1.2.57). The stark—and very literal—divide in this confrontation exposes the anxieties Hall notices—of England's "cultural identity" when confronting non-white nations—but more locally in the play the military conflict. Smith explains that Othello is "the corresponding black threat within," the Ottoman working internally to destabilize Venice , which not only reflects racist tensions in Venice, but it also demonstrates the quickness with which racism can incite violence (109). Othello as the Other remains a contaminant—a "savage," as Bartels explains—against the white city, specifically because of his skin color. His association with Desdemona, an association which Brabantio and others wish to exterminate, only hinders his existence in the white state. This confrontation thus reinforces the racist thinking guiding Brabantio, Iago, and others.

However, when standing trial for his marriage to Desdemona, Othello's status as a contaminant withers as he proves himself assimilated into white society. His defense hinges on his military prowess:

> Her father loved me, oft invited me,
> Still questioned me the story of my life
> From year to year—the battles, sieges,
> fortunes
> That I have passed. (1.3.130-3)

These lines are especially important—through his military exploits Othello defends his image and his worthiness to be Desdemona's husband. He does not reference his race at all, but simply his expenditures in the war against Turkey. By doing so, he establishes himself as different from this Other—Turkey—to appear white. He may not look like the rest of Venice, but, as Othello implies, he acts like them. If he is not belligerent against Venice—but is instead aiding Venice—then he must consequently be an ally to Venice. To prove this, however, he must metaphorically whiten himself to the jury, to prove that he is like them.

Unfortunately, this defense is not enough. He requires the assistance of Desdemona, a white woman, to provide further defense. In her testimony, she explains, "I saw Othello's visage in his mind, / And to his honors and his valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate" (1.3.255-7). Desdemona is committing attention away from his otherness to demonstrate how he relates to Venice. Like his speech, she instead focuses on how he presents himself to the white-dominated Venice: through his own imagination. Literary theorist Margo Hendricks notes that Desdemona's admission is "looking away from the fact of Othello's blackness to focus on her own mental construct or imagining of Othello's reality," which identifies her omission of race in her defense (qtd. in Smith 121). However, such an omission does not mean she is ignoring Othello's skin color—at best, her words illustrate her passion for Othello, reinforcing her commitment of her "soul and fortunes" to him. At worst, her defense aids the jury's interrogation of his Blackness because she is not explicitly calling out their racism. Violence here is subtle: the mental image of a Black man as established by a white order is violence against Othello because it is expressly them speaking of—and controlling the narrative of—Othello in unfavorable, inaccurate, and racist conceptions. In effect, Desdemona's defense is complicated—her words

defend his authenticity as a husband, but they also work as fuel for the white jury. They dig Othello deeper into a hole, a hole out of which he must dig himself.

When Othello provides further defense, he continues this trend of whitening himself, enforcing a self-violence. When he does so, he explains that "[s]he loved me for the dangers I had passed, / And I loved her that she did pity them. / This only is the witchcraft I have used" (1.3.169-71). Explaining how the two love each other, Othello confirms that Desdemona is in love with the figure of Othello rather than the essence of Othello. It is because of his "valiant parts" that she loves him. Fascinatingly, he echoes Brabantio's words, that he wooed her through "witchcraft," which echoes the racist voices who accused him of such actions (1.3.66). In calling his actions "witchcraft," he may simply be mocking the racism against him. Yet, to appeal to racists, he speaks the language of racism. To speak of himself in such degrading terms implies his own othering is necessary for validation and acceptance to the white order. Even simpler is that his self-violence justifies his right to exist—how else would Venice look upon him if nobody believes he is one of them? After the trial, the Duke, speaking to Brabantio, notes how much Othello impressed him by declaring that Othello is "far more fair than black" (1.3.293). The racist hegemony takes note of his words and deeds and accepts him into their white world. More broadly, "Iago's description is immediately undermined when Othello himself appears, a regal, eloquent, and accomplished general hastening to answer the Senate's call and not preoccupied with" Iago's racist remarks (Bartels 448). By ignoring his Blackness and instead embracing whiteness, Othello satisfies the jury in proving to them that he is not the "Moor" they think he is. Othello, to exonerate himself, whitens himself through assimilation to the racist hegemony.

Apart from the jury, Iago's attacks against Othello exponentially increase Othello's alienation from his race. In private, Iago makes known his racism as he plans to use it against Othello. For example, he asks Roderigo "what delight shall [Desdemona] have / to look on the devil?" (2.2.227-28). Referring to Othello as "the devil," Iago connotes an image of Othello as a blackened, monstrous creature. This parallel showcases, again, how Iago conceptualizes Othello—through whiteness and white supremacy. Through language he cements his violence against Othello. In public, he works to deceive Othello. As Adelman notes, Iago "is a master at splitting others: his seduction of Othello works by inscribing in Othello the sense of dangerous interior spaces—thoughts that cannot be known, monsters in the mind—which Othello seems to lack, introducing him to the world of self-alienation" (128). The effects of such deceit begin subtle, yet they grow on Othello. In one scene, the two exchange the following dialogue:

> OTHELLO. What dost thou think?
> IAGO. Think, my lord?
> OTHELLO. "Think, my lord?" By heaven, thou echo'st me,
> As if there were some monster in thy thought
> Too hideous to be shown. (3.3.115-19)

Iago—perhaps calculatedly—builds up Othello to burst out. To prove that Othello is the "Moor" as Iago understands him to be, he offers to Othello "the sense of dangerous interior spaces," which Adelman notes that he "seems to lack." In other words, to degrade Othello, Iago exposes to him the idea of "monsters" lying in his thoughts. However, Adelman's assessment about Othello is not fully accurate. Othello recognizes that there exists a "monster" in Iago's "thought / Too hideous to be shown," demonstrating his knowledge of such "dangerous interior spaces." He even hints at its existence during the trial, where he works to dispel Venice's own "monsters" invading its thoughts. The depth of such knowledge, however, is debatable. As Othello is the only Black man in Venice, Iago becomes a vehicle through which

he can attempt to understand Venice. Iago can thus fill Othello's mind with projections of racism and white supremacy. In doing so, Iago further builds up Othello's "self-alienation"—after Othello has whitened himself for the Venetian jury, Iago makes him doubt reality. Othello rightly assumes that there is "some monster" in Iago's thoughts, but what are they?

As a result, Othello risks becoming impressionable, to have his mind molded by a white man. His comment that Iago "doubtless / Sees and knows more, much more, than he unfolds" opens a gateway through which Othello risks further alienating himself (3.3.258-59). If he trusts Iago's intuition, Othello risks doubting himself and, hence, risks believing the lies about his Blackness. In one scenario he explains that he is "black / And have not those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have" (3.3.279-81). Thinking that, because he is "black," he therefore has more trouble than a white person in understanding Venetian society, Othello degrades his flesh. In another instance, as Iago convinces Othello that Desdemona cheated, Othello angrily states that "My name, that was as fresh / As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black / As mine own face" (3.4.402-4). Equating Blackness to the degradation of his name, Othello again establishes a negative connotation of his skin color. Within the play's bounds, he has been—and still is—succumbing to the racism against him. As there is no one else like him through which he may explore this otherness, he is forced to trust—and is thus trapped in—a racist society degrading his worth. Smith suggests "how steeped" Othello's language is "in racial self-awareness," showing the extent to which he has internalized said othering (111). At the same time, he does not fight against Venice's racism—because he is "steeped" in white culture, his solution to survival is to metaphorically whiten himself. In this case, he does so through reconstructing his mind to comply with Venice's whiteness. Unfortunately, this tactic comes at the cost of the degradation of the Black body. Othello may not have seen another way out of this situation, but if he did, he might well have made these choices out of desperation and survival. Thus, we see how his complicated ideas about how best to navigate the white world develop.

The effects of such deception manifest in the final scene. As Iago's deceit encapsulates Othello—recall that he thinks Iago "Sees and knows more, much more, than he unfolds"—he no longer trusts Desdemona. More tragically, he does not even trust himself—his self-confidence from Act I has morphed into "self-alienation" as Adelman describes. In a way, he is no longer himself—no longer a Black man, but rather the "Moor" many accuse him to be and "the devil" Iago calls him. The killing of Desdemona, then, is the culmination of these violent attacks against Othello. Her killing is symbolic in that it is the first physically violent outburst from Othello against Venice's white hegemony that leads to death. The tragedy marks itself as three major things: that Iago's deception worked, that Venice has direct evidence of an enemy at their gates, and that Othello did not realize the "monsters" Adelman notes consumed him. Preoccupied with Desdemona and her supposed infidelity, her murder also serves as Othello fighting back against his own "monsters," ones he believed manifested through his wife. However, one must remember the origins of these thoughts and the intentions behind implanting them in Othello. Smith notes that the play relates this tragedy to "the question of moral responsibility," but the direction the play takes pins all the blame on Othello for the murder (113). Iago becomes an afterthought after saying "Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. / From this time forth I never will speak word" (5.2.311-12). His words serve not only his white privilege—none of the characters force him to speak again on stage—but they also signify another manifestation of Othello's "monsters." This reorientation of who is plaguing his thoughts—Desdemona or Iago—swiftly shifts to Iago after Cassio admits he was part of Iago's plot to deceive Othello. Oth-

ello is stricken at the murder, and these emotions percolate into his final act.

It is in his realizations that he strips his whiteness and consciously identifies with the Other. After he wounds Iago in a fury-fueled attack, Lodovico associates him with barbarism: "O thou Othello, that was once so good, / Fall'n in the practice of a cursèd slave, / What shall be said to thee?" (5.2.299-301). Believing that there is nothing one can say to reconvert Othello back to white society, Lodovico relegates him to being "a cursèd slave," reinforcing the racism surrounding Othello. Othello, horrifically, accepts this narrative and, at the very end, identifies with it. Right before he stabs himself, he speaks of a "turbaned Turk" who "traduced the state," in which case he "took by th' throat the circumcisèd dog / And smote him, thus," stabbing himself as he stabbed the "turbaned Turk" (5.2.363-66). Horrifically, Othello bridges the gap between Venice and Turkey, identifying himself as not only the state's savior, but also as the state's enemy. More significant is how he creates a parallel between himself and the "turbaned Turk" who "traduced the state"—Smith notes that Othello's "act of self-slaughter, an attack on his own body, is designed to punish a racialized self who . . . has committed the heinous assault on Venice in the person of Desdemona" (111). In other words, it is Othello who, in killing the white Desdemona, has "traduced the state." But, by mentioning the "turbaned Turk," he provides a clear, if problematic, identity of himself that pits him squarely for—and against—Venice. Put this way, Othello has returned to his sense of self but by now comprehensively establishes his identity with the Other. He has internalized the violent racism plaguing him, and it, tragically, encases him.

Venice's racism does not end after his death. Othello, dying, tells the state to "Speak of me as I am" (5.2.352). Feather argues that Othello's "greatest concern is how he will be presented, betraying his preoccupation with unifying his body and his social identity," but this does not seem to be the case (255). Othello indeed cares about his image, but asking Venice to speak of him as he is implies that this unification between body and social identity exists. He knows his place as a Black man in white Venice; his admonition to Venice's leadership is looking both outwards and inwards—outwards in that he desires accurate representation, and inwards in that he hopes they take his words seriously. However, to put his trust in white society to tell the story of a Black man is a trepid, dangerous concept. Might he not think that they will twist his story to make him out to be the violent "Moor," "the devil," the "cursèd slave," or the "turbaned Turk"? White people are privileged in that they can avoid talking about—and even learning about—race and racism because of how little it affects them. For them to talk about Othello "will require the reconsideration of one's own part in this destructive, parasitic construct of power" (Smith 122). Thus, "To speak of Othello will also include listening to members of nondominant groups in order to expand awareness that might lead to effective change and introduce relevant perspectives that can better facilitate speaking of others" (122). However, Venice avoids doing so entirely. Lodovico instructs Cassio "to the state / This heavy act with heavy heart relate," completely going against Othello's wish (5.2.381-82). Here, Lodovico instructs Cassio to retell the tragedy rather than Othello's story. Venice does not learn—their racism does not escape. Violence against the Black body does not end—Othello, dealing with racism and attempts to survive it while Iago deceives him into "self-alienation," is merely ascribed to an action rather than a life. To the rest of Venice, he no longer matters.

O attempts, in many regards, to capture this narrative that Shakespeare began. However, before analyzing the film, exploring its history provides its own connections to America's problems with exploring violence. Filming had ended in 1999, but Miramax pushed its release date to 2001 because of the 1999 Columbine shooting in Colorado. As Gregory Semenza writes, Miramax was

"Concerned that the bloody finale of "*O*"—which follows the Iago and Othello characters on a rampage through a campus dormitory—paralleled too closely to the high school massacre" (99-100). In the movie's case, however, the focus is not on two white males who expressed white supremacist tendencies (Siddiquee), but rather a Black man who was, like in *Othello*, wronged by a white-dominated society. As the film suggests, violence against the Black community never stopped since *Othello*—rather, such othering persists until now. Yet, Miramax's actions reflect America's wider problem in confronting violence, and, for that matter, race and racism—that discussing anything critical of the country is taboo. To talk about *O*, then, is to acknowledge the violence during which it was birthed and the violence it is supposedly critiquing.

How, then, does *O* capture *Othello*'s complicated narrative? Director Tim Blake Nelson wishes to "examine violence, not encourage it". As race and racism consistently factor into America's violence, his focus inevitably includes race relations in America. At the same time, Nelson argues that *Othello* is "more about envy than about race," but, as I shall explain, the film makes race a focal point for the narrative, and it does so in highly problematic ways. As Corredera writes, "through a wide range of adaptive choices, the film trades in and ultimately reifies malignant American fantasies—both historical and modern—about black men that overwhelm the film's attempts at positive representation." We are met with Odin, the only Black student in his school, who is the star of the school's basketball team. Hugo, jealous that Odin does not acknowledge his importance in their team's win, vows revenge. The first character we meet is Hugo, who, in a voiceover where white doves are flying away from a caged area, says, "All my life, I always wanted to fly. I always wanted to live like a hawk. I know you're not supposed to be jealous of anything, but to take flight, to soar over everything and everyone—now that's living" (Nelson). The movie, like *Othello*, begins not with the titular Black character, but rather the white man seeking vengeance. In this case, Hugo's revenge is far more explicit than in the play. While this point foreshadows the plot, it centers Hugo's story over Odin's, making the story of whiteness take priority over the story of Blackness.

Other artistic choices complicate Nelson's message. The title refers to Odin, yet the film seems not to be about him. For example, one promotional poster presents Hugo as towering over the miniature Odin, suggesting Odin's inferiority and expected demise to the white hegemony (IMDb). Additionally, as the setting suggests, this movie is about whiteness and the survival of the Black body in whiteness. Taking place in South Carolina in an all-white prep school, Odin, like Othello, is the Other. He is the single Black body in a sea of whiteness. However, like Othello, he has something to offer to the white hegemony that ultimately provides for its continued function. Odin, as Semenza writes, "is revered on campus as the savior who will bring Palmetto Grove its twentieth state basketball championship in the 115-year history of the school" (102). To the school, he is a messianic figure insofar that he provides material gains to them. In this way, he does not need to prove to white society his usefulness—he has already secured it. Unlike Othello, who had to withstand a trial to defend himself, Odin's actions on court are plenty to prove his usefulness.

Unfortunately, racism and white supremacy permeate the school. During a party where Odin is with his white girlfriend, Desi (or Desdemona), Hugo and Roger (or Roderigo) devise a plot to expel Odin. Referring Odin to Dean Brable (or Brabantio), they accuse Odin of "forcing" himself on Desi (Nelson). Although Odin disproves this allegation, using such an allegation at all reflects the broader stereotype of Black men as sexual menaces to white women—echoing the same accusation Iago made of Othello. This example specifically echoes the stereotype of the "black buck," a historical term identifying Black

men as sexually rapacious and vicious to the point of committing rape (Corredera). The conflict eerily echoes those accused of—and sometimes killed because of—said falsifications. Emmett Till, for example, simply whistled at a white woman. White supremacists, however, saw this as an attack against whiteness; as punishment, they massacred Till. Although invoking this historical example parallels the attacks against Othello as "tupping [Brabantio's] white ewe," the film nonetheless presents a highly problematic stereotype about Black men that one cannot divorce from the film's American setting. In the aftermath of the incident, Odin beats up Roger in retaliation, saying, "If you ever lie to me again, I'll fuck your punk ass up a lot worse than this" (Nelson). As Corredera suggets, "The significance of this scene lies in the fact that it occurs before jealousy begins to affect Odin's thinking and behavior, thereby suggesting that Odin innately tends toward having a violent nature." Nelson, then, relegates Odin to the stereotype of the Black man as dangerous to white society. Like the historical figure of the "brute," which sociologist David Pilgrim explains is "the savage, destructive, and criminal black man," Nelson writes Odin as possessing such historical stereotypes (qtd. in Corredera). This development of Odin is problematic and dangerous—Nelson's use of these tropes on screen muddles the film's intentions to expose violence. Instead, the film reifies violence through its character depictions.

Stereotypes continue, reinforcing the blatant—and dangerous—misrepresentations about Black men. As Odin is the star of his basketball team, Nelson reinforces the essentialism regarding Black men and basketball. Cementing Odin in such a role suggests, on one hand, Odin's physical prowess in sports—just like Othello's prowess in the military. At the same time, it reflects the stereotype that Black men play and excel at basketball. Far more dangerous, and continuing the dialogue of the "black buck," is the scene in which Odin rapes Desi. Hugo has been planting in Odin anxieties about his race, notably saying that Mike (or Cassio) and Desi are together. Using his whiteness as a weapon against Odin, Hugo says, "I know you grew up in the hood, so you've seen plenty of hustlers. But the one thing I do know better than you is white girls. And white girls are snakes" (Nelson). Planting these anxieties in Odin, Hugo, like Iago, destabilizes him through psychological means. Like the "interior spaces" Othello does not fully grasp, Odin is in a similar position. Such anxieties manifest when Odin and Desi are in bed and, as Odin looks in the mirror at them, sees instead Mike in his position. Furious, and likely remembering Hugo's words that "white girls are snakes," Odin begins raping Desi, drowning out her pleas for him to "stop." Odin plays into the "black buck" caricature, directly pitting him as a predator to the white order. The scene, in addition to exhibiting Odin's violent misogyny, broadly demonstrates Odin's mounting anxieties regarding his place in the all-white prep school. As a result, it reinforces this dangerous stereotype concerning Black men and masculinity. In the aftermath of this incident Odin falls back into taking drugs, again defaulting to essentialist rhetoric, this time rhetoric that cements Black people as obsessive drug users. Semenza notes that this scene "marks the turning point in the film, the moment when Odin is no longer above his peers but, instead, has become a prisoner just like them" (114). Reading this scene as "the turning point" is accurate, but Semenza does not acknowledge the implicit danger in exhibiting such a scene. The focus must center on the implications of Odin raping Desi—as a caricature of the Black man as a menace to white women.

Odin's performance at a freestyle basketball show furthers this dangerous rhetoric surrounding Black men. Right before the show, Odin corners Hugo and exclaims "You really fucked me up. … If I knew that Desi was going behind my back, I could deal with that. But all this wondering you got me going through is bullshit" (Nelson). He then pins Hugo against a wall, again reinforcing

the image of Odin as a "brute." Through the intersection of language and violence Odin expresses his volatility against the white hegemony. Then, as Odin is seething with the "wondering" Hugo has forced onto him, he channels that rage into physical showmanship. Surrounded by a white audience and depicting his physicality—which eerily invokes slaver auctions—Odin dunks the basketball into the hoop so strongly it shatters, leaving the hoop to dangle. Using a Black body in this way has the opposite effect of what Nelson intends—instead of critiquing violence, he is again reinforcing it. Then, when a young Black boy comes to retrieve the ball, Odin pushes him down. Then, he throws the basketball into the shattered backboard, making the hoop fall to the ground. He then grabs the dislocated hoop and holds it in the air as a trophy—even a testament—to such volatility. The predominantly white audience, understandably, is unnerved. Each of these actions reflect what Corredera explains about the basketball court: it "becomes a site for displaying authorized physical dominance that, according to hegemonic white logic, the black male would otherwise turn against society through criminality." Put another way, the court functions as a space in which a white audience can enjoy the stereotyped brutality of Black men. In this case, the white audience was able to comfortably view Odin's "physical dominance." However, once his rage spills out of the court and onto another life—in this case, the young Black boy's—the audience's illusions about the court are shattered. Through these actions Odin fulfills the stereotype of Black men as physically violent.

The final scene manifests these stereotypes and returns to the complicated narrative introduced in the beginning. As the scene climaxes into Odin choking Desi to death, Odin's unhinged rage again places him within the stereotype of Black men as menaces to whiteness. Paralleling the scene in which Othello murders Desdemona, this scene's American context only worsens its image on-screen because of the cultural history against Black people. Then, perhaps in the most complicated dialogue of the film, Odin, in his final moments, says "I ain't no different than none of y'all. My mom's ain't no crackhead. I wasn't no gangbanger. It wasn't some hoodrat drug dealer that tripped me up. It was this white, prep-school motherfucker standing right there. You tell them where I'm from—to make me do this," followed by him shooting himself (Nelson). As Semenza notes, "the film explicitly rejects the idea that 'black culture' is responsible for the massacre" (116). However, if "'black culture'" is not responsible, then what is? Odin expressly rejects the otherness that may have contributed to his actions—he may have, in Hugo's words, "grew up in the hood," but his history there defies how American society stereotypes Black communities. By rejecting said otherness, Odin instead shifts the blame to the white hegemony—to the "white, prep-school motherfucker" who injected Odin with such anxious "wondering" influencing his actions. Yet, this incident ends with his suicide—the death of the Black body. As much as Odin's words could have mattered, they no longer do. They come and go the same way Odin does—in an explosive, rage-fueled moment of self-preservation against white society. Nelson's intentions, again, appear lost—if he wishes for Odin to have his story heard, why have Odin commit suicide? Why commit to senseless violence enacted against the Black body?

Such a choice may be a fault of how closely Nelson follows the source material. Like *Othello*, it is not Odin's story that is told. As the camera fades from the massacre, it focuses on Hugo in a police car. His voiceover then enters, saying "All my life I always wanted to fly. I always wanted to live like a hawk. … Odin is a hawk. He soars above us. He can fly. One of these days, everyone's gonna pay attention to me—because I'm gonna fly, too" (Nelson). Staying faithful to the source material, Nelson reorients the focus of the tragedy away from Odin—from telling his story—to returning to the white hegemony and

their plans in the aftermath. In this way, the film—like the play—begins and ends with whiteness. We hear nothing more about Odin, and there is no real justice for him—his story stops upon his suicide, and Hugo's continues. Hugo may be going to jail, but the parallels to American society are stark—too often white men, and specifically police officers, either receive no punishment for murdering a Black person, or they serve minimal time in prison. Hugo likely will receive the same fate. The persistence of racism and white supremacy, coupled with the film's deeply American setting and its allusions to historical caricatures, muddles the film's intentions to create dialogue surrounding racism.

The question, then, is the extent to which this film challenges racism and white supremacy. As the abundance of stereotypes against Odin show, there seems to be little room in which one can comfortably argue that this film does anything in the way of precipitating social change. To think about the film as challenging white supremacy, then, falls apart because "The stereotypes presented … take on added cultural meaning due to the film's American context and therefore dominate the film. This dynamic thereby limits the efficacy garnered from potential racial counternarratives, including Odin's final plea" (Corredera). In this way, it is not an effective tool to confront violence—rather, it stands as a model to America's continuing legacy of racism. Pedagogically this film works to teach what problems Black people in America face, but it centers Black suffering rather than Black triumph. Reitz-Wilson's view that the film is "pedagogically useful" holds far different weight in 2021 where Black suffering is the norm.

Reviews, for example, focus little on the film's depictions of race and racism and more on its faithfulness to *Othello*. Steven Kellman explains that the film "is Shakespeare without his language, which is about as useful as Delacroix without color. You still get a sense of structure and theme, but without his poetry" (175). Does a film adapting Shakespeare necessarily have to follow Shakespeare's "poetry"? Doing so risks, for example, focusing adaptations far more on how Shakespeare writes his plays rather than what he says. Adaptations, after all, are meant to tell stories using a base work for inspiration. Is *O* not valid in its attempt to adapt *Othello* to a 21st-century American setting? As problematic as the film is, it captures the essence of *Othello*—the racism of Venetian society, the "self-alienation" of Othello, the jealousy and betrayal coursing throughout—without needing to use Shakespeare's language. Patrick Finn, another reviewer, writes that "this film is not so much about race as it is about tax brackets" (85). Quite problematically, Finn condenses the burgeoning racial issues in *O* as minor to "tax brackets." Finn provides no explanation for "tax brackets," but what he may mean is that this film is about wealth and poverty. For that to be the case is to acknowledge "race" as he describes it, since wealth and poverty are closely tied to race. There is no question that *O* is a faithful adaptation of its source work. However, its goal of challenging racism falls far short because of its cultural insensitivity—because it follows the source material too closely in a country where racism and white supremacy are the norm.

In exploring *Othello* and *O*, we realize that, just as *Othello* works to uphold systems of power, so, too, does *O* reinforce the white supremacist hegemony holding America together. Iago and Roderigo's use of language as violence permeates their depiction of Othello. Othello's trial, controlled by white Venice, actualizes Othello as the Other, going so far as to require Desdemona to give authority to his defense. However, throughout the trial he whitens himself to appeal to the Venetians. Iago's attacks against him result in furthering Othello's "self-alienation." Such tactics risk turning Othello's mind malleable to the racist hegemony around him. These depictions manifest in the murder of Desdemona. Yet, it is this same tragedy that brings him to identify with the Other. Even in his death Venice continues its racism by disregarding his dying wish.

O, created around the Columbine shooting, depicts Hugo's attempts to destabilize Odin. In doing so, the film shows its complicated relationship with race and racism. The question of whose story Nelson is portraying proves consequential to his overall message. Stereotypes abound throughout the movie, depicting Odin as a "brute," a "black buck," and a violent figure to all. The final scene encapsulates the problems with the film—with a vapid defense of Blackness followed by its self-destruction—and reminds us that, like *Othello*, this film is more about Hugo's story than Odin's. Its attempts to challenge racism and white supremacy, then, fall flat.

In the fight against America's white supremacist patriarchy, we must not stop to forget the history that has led us here. To know our history is to realize its manifestations in different mediums. And to realize its manifestations in different mediums is to critically engage with toxic sources that disempower, to know what is problematic, and to learn how best to go about building a productive alternative. Just as capitalist realism fools us into believing that imagining the end of the world is easier than imagining the end of capitalism, we must remember that kings, too, fall. Just as systems of abuse rise and fall, so, too, may America's toxic, violent, and repulsive system of racism and white supremacy fall. Through the power and practice of antiracism may we one day see a truly equitable future where the global white hegemony is no more. We may do well to remember the words of bell hooks. She writes that Black men "in the culture of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy are feared but they are not loved. . . . If black males were loved they could hope for more than a life locked down, caged, confined; they could imagine themselves beyond containment" (xi). In other words, if our cisheteronormative, patriarchal, white supremacist society loved Black men as it does white men, Black men could flourish. We need not confine our activism to Black men alone—a manifesto like antiracism includes the express purpose of challenging racism at all corners, wherever it may lurk, even if it means challenging our entire political, economic, and social systems. As art is one of many ways to confront and fight racism, we must remember its purpose and power—to disrupt, to uproot, to challenge, and to rupture. Nelson's art, put simply, missed that mark.

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