

## Othello: *In the Age of Black Lives Matter and DACA*

“Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance: that you o’erstep not

the modesty of nature. For anything so o’erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature...”

(*Hamlet*, Act 3, scene 2)

### *Table of Contents*

*Introduction: Playing Shakespeare’s Lovers: “I know thou wilt say ‘aye’...”*

Louis Fantasia

1. *All the Loves of a Dream One Midsummer’s Night* 7

Ellen Geer

2. *Bassanio, or How a Hustler Falls in Love* 11

Charles Duff

3. *Gender Flipping Shrew: Remedy or Band Aid?* 25

Cindy Gold

4. *Caliban in Love* 31

Susan Gayle Todd

5. *Othello: In the Age of Black Lives Matter and DACA* 47

Baron Kelly

6. *Roundtable: Playing at Love in the Age of Tinder* 55

Manon Spadaro and Members of the Chicago Youth Shakespeare Company

7. *Jaques: Shadow and Serpent* 71

Jonathan Litten

8. *What’s Love Got to Do with It? (It’s Complicated)* 85

Allison DeLauer

9. *Speak Low—Shakespeare’s Language of Love* 95

Louis Fantasia

*Contributors* 107

## BARON Kelly

In the age of Black Lives Matter, when unarmed black and brown boys and men in America are being senselessly killed by law enforcement, when the racist divisions in our country are becoming more overt, what are the different ways Shakespeare's *Othello* can resist any attempt to endorse what are labeled racist assumptions? Shakespeare wrote about characters who are socially excluded, discriminated against, alien: Caliban, Shylock, Othello, Sycorax, the witches of *Macbeth*. Also, the association of blackness with both innate evil and natural servitude is exemplified in Aaron, the demonic Moor of Shakespeare's earliest tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*. Early in the play, the ambitious Aaron seeks to cast off his "slavish weeds and servile thoughts" (2.1.18), yet when he calls the child of his adulterous liaison with the Empress a "thick-lipped slave" (4.2.181), it is as though he instinctively recognized the baby as marked for servitude by its appearance. At the same time, wishing only to "have his soul black like his face" (3.1.208). Aaron celebrates his own color as the badge of a wickedness he shares with almost all the other black characters of early Elizabethan drama.

When Iago, in the course of the tirade with which he opens *Othello*, snidely refers to the protagonist as "his Moorship" (1.1.35), he immediately highlights the ethnic tensions in the play. Not once in the scene do the other characters refer to Othello by name; instead he is simply "the Moor," "the thicklips," and "an extravagant and freewheeling stranger" (1.1.151).

From the perspective established in the play's first scene, what we nowadays call "race" would appear absolutely central to the tragedy of *Othello*.

Race has been among the most fiercely debated social issues of our times. Othello's blackness has come to dominate any interpretation of the play. In Shakespeare's *Othello*, Othello's race and color do not simply determine the reaction of the reactions of other characters to him, they also explain his actions. In other words, Shakespeare suggests that Othello behaves as he does because he is black. And to suggest that a person's behavior is racially determined is, by definition, racist.

In today's real world, it is easy to see how racism is alive and well in digital online comment sections. Today, the digital age is "the real world." Polls and studies that measure racism are hotly debated because most people won't acknowledge their prejudice to a stranger. The subject is so subjective and politically charged, and many people, of all races, may not recognize their own biases. In a world of racial profiling, systematic inequalities and extreme prejudice are abundant in too many people who are sworn to serve and protect. Such disrespectful treatment of people of color is simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Contrast the following recent incident in Las Vegas involving football player Michael Bennett, with recently-surfaced dash camera footage showing a Cobb County, Georgia officer, Lt. Greg Abbott, comforting a nervous white woman who had been pulled over and expressed her fear. On Saturday, August 26th 2017, Seattle Seahawks football star Michael Bennett was among of group of people attending the Mayweather vs. McGregor boxing match in Las Vegas. Bennett and others began fleeing what sounded like gun shots when police officers brought him down to the ground, dug a knee into his back and threatened to blow his "f---ing head off" (Mather). Lt. Abbott, in contrast, told the

terrified woman, “But you’re not black. Remember, we only kill black people.” In the wake of the furor, Abbott retired—with full benefits (Hauser and Fortin).

African American high school students, particularly in depressed urban and rural communities in America, need to understand that the same conversations about race that have been relevant for generations, still apply in 2018. How do the visuals of prison bars in film director Oliver Parker’s 1995 *Othello* resonate with the surveillance and criminalization of black men and women in twentieth-century America? How do the racial tensions that accompany Othello’s presence in Venice relate to the students’ experiences in and out of school?

The continuing immediacy of the issue that is played to the worst fears of whites for example, black crime, or black male super-sexuality deflowering white womanhood, was made apparent by the nationwide reaction to the O.J. Simpson scandal in 1994. When the African American football star and sports broadcaster was arrested for the murder of his white wife, journalists across the country immediately drew comparisons with Othello. By providing an explanatory template for Simpson’s crime, Shakespeare’s tragedy even seemed to confirm the accused’s guilt. Observers claimed to recognize in Simpson the symptoms of a particular jealous psychosis known as “Othello syndrome.”

When issues of race, language, and culture are prominent in national conversations, the reading and writing students engage in can present both opportunities and challenges. In the age of Black Lives Matter and DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) teachers can use *Othello* as a basis for discussion on how race plays out in current images seen today. Othello can be used with students of color and their white counterparts as they learn to understand one another in and out of the classroom. Othello can be used for students to work through difficult perspectives as they try to understand racism today. The assumption of black violence and also black naiveté that is played out to its logical conclusion in *Othello* haunts people of color in their own neighborhoods, still choreographs their steps, and motivates full body searches by police when they stop a car for a missing headlight. The fear of being judged less than—which we all face at different times of our lives—plays out particularly for first generation, low income students of color. These students do not understand that asking questions or even asking for help is a sign of curiosity and interest, and not of weakness.

Students spend a lot of time learning academic skills, but rarely do they talk about the emotional reactions they may have to what they read, which may address deeper themes. Students in school are pushed to become clinical crafters of arguments and masters of academic language. While these are essential skills, students appear perfectly comfortable not acknowledging and discussing emotional responses to literature. Characters are fictitious abstractions, and, without actors to bring them to life, and makeup and digital tricks to make the drama feel real, students are blocked and may strictly do the analytical work without a significant emotional response. In my opinion, this is a bad thing. An emotional response to drama and literature should be part of the curriculum.

In the right hands, the important stories, grim plots and all, can help students cope with real life. A work like *Othello* becomes a way to address the corrosive legacy of racism that continues to haunt society. The process of entering imagined worlds of fiction builds empathy and improves one’s ability to take another person’s point of view.

Since the number of black teachers is declining significantly, and the population of all minorities is rising, it is important to ponder those implications for black students. Shakespeare's Othello lives and works in a white environment. The play concerns itself with shame, humiliation, and a sense of betrayal. It is crucial for students to explore the nuances of these feelings. and "all of his complexion" (2.7.87). Hamlet denigrates his mother's choice when, comparing pictures of his father, he puns "Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed, and batten on this Moor? Ha, have you eyes" (3.4.77). In *The Tempest*, the King of Naples, in the eyes of his court, has brought disaster on himself because he was foolish enough to marry his daughter to the King of Tunis, or "lose her to an African" (2.1.133). As Virginia Mason Vaughan notes in her book *Othello: A Contextual History*, "Black skin signified in addition to visual ugliness an ingrained moral infection, a taint in the blood often linked to sexual perversion, and the desire to possess a white woman—her body, her status, her wealth, or her power".

The question also arises did Shakespeare know any black people? Could he have known any black people? Miranda Kaufman's *Black Tudors: The Untold Story* establishes through scholarly research that in parish records there were hundreds of black people in Elizabethan England. There was an ambassadorial visit in 1600–1601 to Queen Elizabeth's court by Abd el-Ouahed ben Messaoud Anoun Mohammed and his entourage from the Barbary Coast, to discuss their common enemy, Philip II of Spain. It was in the interests of the North African states to form an alliance with Elizabeth I. So, yes, Shakespeare could have known some black people. The question is, did he do his homework? Did he bother to get to know any black people? If he didn't, was he being lazy? If he did get to know some black people, and still wrote the Othello of the second half who becomes an obsessive murderous honor killer, was he being a bigot?

Students must be made aware that the Black presence in Britain has been rigorously historicized: harking back to Roman times. It includes the African entertainers in the Tudor court, the servants, valets, extending to the grooms of Hogarth's time, seamen, hostel keepers, the African American anti-slavery campaigners, and such 19th-century greats as the composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, to the earliest Black Shakespeare performers, Ira Aldridge, and after him, Paul Robeson. Aldridge and Robeson both challenged the virulent racial assumptions of their respective time.

Teachers can use the lessons from *Othello* to talk about how people in contemporary society live authentic lives despite the narrative of racism. How do we face our fears and self-doubt? What happens when we confront institutional forms of racism? The weak, minority, and the poor are targeted recipients of racism that is being politically endorsed. Different groups of immigrants are played off against each other. In the twenty-first century, black students are still called names like "nigger," "pick niddy," and "chocolate mousse." They have been discouraged from taking STEM course, though their parents are doctors and scientists. Some white teachers still feel black students aren't capable of handling advanced courses.

It is necessary for these uncomfortable conversations to be pushed forward in this historical moment. One of the biggest conditions of impossibility that people of color face everyday is the isolation and self-destruction felt by Othello. Is Othello a warrior, wife murderer, gullible dupe, or victim of a campaign of hate?

Teachers of Shakespeare in high schools and colleges can initiate discussions of how people of color

navigate public spaces. How might the Latino or African American student who has been adopted and raised by a white family in a white culture be both similarly a part of and separate from that culture in their everyday lives? How might Iago's alienation be felt in the current political climate of disgruntled working class white voters, and the issue of immigration and DACA?

Students can be taught to choose to cross the ancient line of racism to find common ground for social change, or we can continue to allow the color line as Langston Hughes noted in his poem *A Dream Deferred*, "to fester like a sore" and to "sag like a heavy load" on the nation until it explodes.

No wonder that Vaughan, in the course of her contextual history of the play and its reception, should find herself oscillating helplessly between the two positions: "I think this play is racist, and I think it is not." But Vaughan goes on to warn against the impossibility of escaping this conundrum, since "Othello's example shows me that if I insist on resolving the contradiction, I will forge only lies and distortions...the discourse of racial difference is inescapably embedded in this play just as it was embedded in Shakespeare's culture and our own" (70). Like *Othello* itself, we may resist this discourse, but, as the play's reception and performance histories demonstrate, learning to think outside its parameters in the Age of Black Lives Matter and DACA is a much more difficult matter.