"My People Invented The Word" – Race & Imperialism in Shakespeare's "Othello"

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Shakespeare's *Othello* is at once a classically Elizabethan tale as well as a Venetian one. The historical context of the times played a major role in shaping the play and its alienated title character. In Elizabethan times, the cultural/social/political wars were waged against the Moor, the racial and religious Other, the "non-European outsider" (Mafe 49). In the setting of the play, the cultural/social/political wars were waged against the Turks who were closely connected through notions of religious Other-ness to the same Moors of Shakespeare's time. Though a tale of envy, sexual desire, and madness, the tragic play *Othello* also marks the emergence of racist doctrine along with the theme of imperialist ideology, a concept nicely incorporated in both Oliver Parker's "Othello" and Tim Nelson's "O." The play and both movies deal with the title character's struggle against racial stereotypes of his time, and also probe the question of whether or not Othello's violent rage is intrinsic and in fact stemming from his cultural background. The text and its two adaptations also explore notions of imperialism that would not have been at all uncommon in Shakespeare's time by focusing on Othello's attempts to be the social, political and religious equal of his figurative colonizers despite his slave roots. The notions of racism and imperialism are inextricably linked themselves, and what is perhaps most interesting is how the movies address this intersection through the characters' presentation, the use of the graphic word "nigger," and the motif of the basketball game. Shakespeare's *Othello*, Parker's "Othello," and Nelson's "O" all bring illustrations of race and imperialism to the forefront of the tragic play, simultaneously reinforcing and struggling with these issues.

Shakespeare's *Othello* brings forth questions of race as it contemplates whether Othello's madness and rage are intrinsic components of his racial identity and therefore a product of his cultural and possibly religious background; both movie adaptations also do an admirable job addressing this problematic issue of race. Historically, there is no reason to assert that Shakespeare wasn't aware of the categorization of the Other referring to Moors and specifically, the black Moors of Europe (49). This awareness is clearly illustrated in *Othello*. The play itself was written two years after Queen Elizabeth's historical edict calling for the expulsion of all dark-skinned (black) people from England:

Whereas the Queen's majesty, tendering the good and welfare of her own natural subjects, greatly distressed in these hard times of dearth, is highly discontented to understand the great numbers of Negroes and blackamoors which…are carried into this realm…who are fostered and powered here, to the great annoyance of her own liege people that which co[vet?] [sic] the relief which these people consume, as also for that the most of them are infidels having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel: hath given a special commandment that the said kind of people shall be with all speed avoided and discharged out of this her majesty's realms… (qtd. in Mafe 48)

The Queen's reasons for expelling these individuals from her kingdom emphasize their Other-ness. The "Negroes and blackamoors" are "fostered and powered" in England, and they consume the relief that "her own liege people" covet. Besides this notion of financial and empowered Other-ness, these individuals are also different in their religion because they have "no understanding of Christ or his Gospel." They are physically Other, socially Other, and religiously Other as asserted by this official proclamation.

The racial tension in *Othello* is penned with remarkable clarity. There is never any doubt that Othello is different from the other fair-skinned Venetians and that this both works to his advantage and disadvantage. He is admired for this difference; Brabanzio loves him before Desdemona does simply for his extraordinary and fantastic(al) tales of slavery and his life as a mercenary. But the difference also clearly harms Othello in that he must struggle against racial stereotypes of the barbarous, "gross," "lascivious," and wrathful Moor (1.1.127). It has been referred to as "perhaps the first work in English to explore the roots of such [racial] feeling; and…belongs to the very period in English history in which something we can now identify as a racialist ideology was beginning to evolve" (Saunders 174). Shakespeare was attempting to create a narrative surrounding an ideology that could not be articulated clearly and explicitly – even by him – simply because the terminology just did not exist at that point. Similarly, if one is to argue that Iago is a "proto-white-supremacist," he is much like Shakespeare: he hates "without a developed ideology" of that hate (175). In fact, according to this argument, Iago (who bitterly tells Rodrigo, "I hate the Moor" (1.3.355)) has no choice but to hate first and look for reasons later because the reasons at this point are not as clear as they eventually become. Iago is almost working backward; he hates Othello and then must figure out just what makes him hate Othello so, and part of that is the racial difference. His task mimics that of Shakespeare's: Iago "must articulate a repulsion that…does not yet have an idiom" (Saunders 175).

In Ania Loomba's *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*, she argues that race must be understood as a "relation of nation, class, and creed or religious practice" in addition to gender considerations (qtd. in Mallin 352). Racial difference in Shakespeare's time, then, was understood "in terms of an inversion or distortion of 'normal' gender roles and sexual behaviour" (Loomba 7). This specific notion of racial difference is present in *Othello* as well in the Moor's love for Desdemona:

And heaven defend your good souls that you think

I will your serious and great business scant

When she is with me. No, when light-winged toys

Of feathered Cupid seel with wanton dullness

My speculative and officed instruments,

That my disports corrupt and taint my business,

Let housewives make a skillet of my helm… (1.3.265-271)

In response to the Duke and Brabanzio, Othello claims that his helmet will serve as a cooking utensil before his love or sexual desire for Desdemona "corrupt[s] and taint[s]" his business. This initially masculinist appeal is highly ironic in that his wife *does* distract him from official state affairs but not of her own volition and therefore retrospectively calls Othello's professed gender role into question.

Powerful and disturbing racial undertones pervade *Othello*, especially seen in the opposition of fairness and blackness that structures the entire play. When taking into account the presumed superiority of the former to the latter within the ethical, religious and cultural discursive deployments of the aforementioned opposition, the figure of Othello becomes increasingly problematic. His status as a noble Moor is shown from the very beginning to be "anomalous, preposterous, and paradoxical" (Saunders 163). He is, in short, a walking oxymoron in a Venice that is at war with the Turks. But *Othello* as a play and a character endures "because it reproduces a conservative ideology that suggests, both implicitly and explicitly, that the white woman who engages in interracial sex is not really white" (Thompson 361). Nowhere is this visually represented more clearly than in the famous "dirty still" from Laurence Olivier's adaptation of the classic play "in which Olivier's black makeup has smudged Maggie Smith's white cheek" (Hodgedon 39). This is the most literal and explicit illustration of Othello's act of staining or tainting his fair bride with his own blackness. In Shakespeare's play, Othello belatedly recognizes a mindset that Iago has exploited to his benefit from the very beginning: that in such a male-dominated society and culture, "an interracial marriage is far more likely to render a fair-skinned woman symbolically "black" than it is to render a dark-skinned man symbolically "white" (Saunders 168). For Desdemona to render Othello white is to imply a force of agency on Desdemona's part, which is impossible given the fact that the female lead is progressively silenced throughout the play. It is far more "logical" for the man to be the force of agency over his wife, hence why Desdemona's love for a black man renders her black as well. But the white Venetian daughter is stained in another important sense as well: she is "the sexually tainted woman traditionally condemned as "black" (Parker 95). Not only does her genuine act of loving Othello alter her symbolic skin color; the alleged act of loving Michael Cassio achieves the same result but with far more disastrous consequences.

It is interesting to note how Oliver Parker and Tim Nelson deal with visually representing issues of race in their respective films. Nelson does so more explicitly and with much more freedom since "O" is based on a screenplay by Brad Kaaya and not on Shakespeare's original work like Parker's movie. Still, Parker manages to convey the issue of racism quite well with his visual opposition between light and dark throughout the movie. In the wedding scene, Irene Jacobs's white hands provide a stark contrast against Lawrence Fishbourne's dark ones as Othello slips the ring onto Desdemona's ring finger. Here, the bride wears her customary white and the groom is dressed in all black with a hood over his head. At one point, he straightens his fingers out next to hers so that the contrast is even more explicit. Kenneth Branagh's Iago holds up his pale hand streaked with black soot. In another scene, he sets three chess pieces on a board; two of them are of white marble and the other is black as "pitch," just like the soot that represents Desdemona's virtue (2.3.334). When Desdemona goes to meet Othello in Cyprus, she is wearing a gown that is mostly black with white embellishments. But perhaps the most striking confrontation of racial issue is in Parker's prologue. The deep timbre of a tuba is smoothed over by the violent violin; a long camera shot illustrates the dimly lit mansions of wealthy Venice; and a gondola moves from the right to the left, and then directly toward the audience. There are two men aboard the gondola and both are wearing black leather vests over white linen shirts as they row the boat (perhaps the costuming choice here might also be noted for its significance in the black-over-white layering). There are two passengers: a man of African descent and a woman of European descent. Those familiar with the play would immediately infer that this is the tragic couple around which the story is centered. As the gondola exits the frame, the man holds up a white theater mask of sadness (Aldama 202). This addresses the issue of race explicitly in that a black man is covering his face with a white mask, thus adding a layer to his identity and also concealing his identity from those around him. In other adaptations of *Othello* such as the Orson Welles or Laurence Olivier versions, a technique such as this is even more problematic in that the title character is a white man imitating a black man who imitates a white man. Even more troublesome, however, is the imagery of a black man moving across water which brings to mind images of the slave trade across the Atlantic Ocean, whether intentional or not on Parker's part.

Tim Nelson has considerably more freedom with his adaptation of *Othello* than Parker did, but he nevertheless manages to bring the modern "O" elegantly back to its thematic and ideological roots with stunningly clever dialogue and appropriate visual imagery. He reminds educated viewers of the original *Othello* and includes other famous literary allusions, but also makes sure to point out that his film is a uniquely American twist on an Elizabethan tale. While his adaptation seems more concerned with notions of envy, the negative influence of adults in a specifically adolescent sphere and the root cause of teen violence, Nelson also manages to engage his viewers in the ever-present debate about race.

The modern Othello, known as Odin James (Mekhi Phifer) attends the prestigious Palmetto Academy in South Carolina (Aldama 204). The setting is notable in that it immediately and explicitly brings to mind images of the old South, of wealthy plantation owners and the Civil War fought in part over the right to own slaves. The movie fits in wonderfully with what Richard Burt calls the "teensploi" films, the motion pictures that gear Shakespeare's stories toward teenagers (Semenza 103). However, these teensploi films usually dumb the Bard's lessons down and reduce his plots to trite high school fantasies about social mobility. Nelson's "O" resists this, though the movie does incorporate aspects of brand-name wearing teenagers of the MTV culture. The students in Nelson's film are smart and sophisticated but most importantly, they follow through with their actions. Typical teensploi films alter the classic tragedies by resolving the matter before any character is killed; "O," on the other hand, ends in a murderous rampage.

The imagery and music in this film speak greatly toward the adolescent mindset of high school with its urge to conform and need to ostracize those that are different. The film incorporates many great tracks from popular African American artists, such as Outkast, that serve to emphasize the fast, suave, and almost urban feel of this evolving prep-school MTV generation. The song that plays during the first basketball game defines blackness as "commonplace or different / Intimate and distant, fresher than an infant" ("O"). This surprisingly tender and positive representation of blackness embraces the paradox that Othello embodies in Shakespeare's original play as the noble Moor, the accepted outsider. Blackness is not threatening, even though it is different. The lyrics also incorporate the Moorish connotation of the title character: "Black like the velvet that the Muslim women wear" ("O"). Not only do the lyrics add layers to the blackness – not only is black a skin color; it's also at times associated with a religion – but the diction makes a point about the non-threatening nature of this blackness. Black is "velvet," a very soft and lush cloth worn by "women" to guard their modesty. Racial difference in the beginning of this film is regarded tenderly, in an almost teasing manner that might suggest that it is not a cause of worry to the central couple. When Odin and Desi (Julia Stiles) are in bed together, they discuss a particularly disturbing racial term:

ODIN: I pulled you 'cause I'm that kind of nigger.

[*Desi turns away and rolls her eyes.*]

ODIN: Uh-oh. Don't be actin' like that. See, I can say nigger because I am a nigger. You can't 'cause you ain't. Don't be jealous.

DESI [*rolls onto her back*]: And why can't I say it? My people invented the word.

ODIN [*smirking*]: You can't even think it. ("O")

Odin states his case concerning the word "nigger." To him, it's only a word – as long as an African American is the one using it. If Desi were to use the word, however, the meaning and implication would be quite different. But due to Odin's teasing tone and the half-grin on his face, accompanied by Desi's matching smirk, the audience can infer that Desi would not use the word to describe Odin but even if she did, he wouldn't take it as badly as if someone else used it, due simply to the tender and loving nature of his relationship with her.

But there are several images and lines to counter this soft, non-threatening image of blackness. In order to emphasize the fact that Odin is the only black student in this South Carolina preparatory school, the coach, Duke, (Martin Sheen) tells his son, "You've always done well and you always will, but Odin's different. He's all alone here. There's not even another black student in this whole damn place" ("O"). Odin is the lone hawk in a school of doves and according to Hugo (Josh Hartnett), a hawk just can't fit in because a bird of prey doesn't know how to act around the milder, less violent doves. And it is because of Hugo's manipulations that Odin is at last unable to survive in his environment. As Mike Cassio (Andrew Keegan) puts it, "He's a freaking loser. The ghetto just popped out of him…the nigger's out of control" ("O"). Othello's barbarism is engendered by Iago's schemes as well as the racism that characterized early modern Europe; similarly, Odin's "descent into violence is…determined by the social construction of black male youth in modern American popular culture" (Semenza 113). Not coincidentally, Odin's initials are O.J., which inextricably link him to a popular figure of American culture whose life paralleled that of Shakespeare's tragic Moor in many ways. The movie also uses the urban music to emphasize the role that African Americans usually take in pop culture: that of drug dealers, thieves, murderers, rappers and pimps. It was also intentional for the drug dealer in this film to be African American, though Nelson was reluctant to take the film in that direction. It is interesting to consider how of the two black characters in the play, one is a drug dealer and the other is a murderer. The cliché of Odin as a young black man doing cocaine on screen was also one that Nelson had hoped to avoid, but his close friend, also an African American, urged him to reconsider.

In the last scenes of the film, Odin engages in countering what Toni Morrison calls "race talk": "the explicit insertion into everyday life of racial signs and symbols that have no meaning other than pressing African Americans to the lowest level of the racial hierarchy" (qtd. in Semenza 115). His final soliloquy is reminiscent of Hamlet's last lines in which he urges the other characters and the audience to remember his tale, but Odin also speaks against the typical racial stereotypes that he knows surround him:

ODIN: Somebody needs to tell the goddamn truth. My life is over. That's it. But while you're all out here, living yours, sitting around talking about the nigger who lost it, back in high school, you make sure you tell them the truth. You tell them I loved that girl. I did. But I got played. He twisted my head up. He fucked it up. I ain't no different than none of you all. My mom ain't no crack head. I wasn't no gang banger. It wasn't some hood rat drug dealer that tripped me up. It was this white, prep school motherfucker standing right there. You tell them where I'm from didn't make me do this. [*Shoots himself.*] ("O")

This heartbreaking soliloquy addresses many of the concerns to be found in Shakespeare's original play, but the film still manages to make its own comments on the situation and its place in contemporary times. The implication here – and Odin realizes this – is that his race is responsible for the destruction of the lives of the white students that surrounded him (Semenza 115). Remembering the comment made by Michael Cassio regarding Odin's roots, one realizes that the attempt to explain away Odin's erratic and violent behavior as a product of his race and background began much before the final rampage and Odin's suicide. Though the film carefully and explicitly rejects the idea that race had anything to do with the events at Palmetto Academy in South Carolina, Odin's final remark about Hugo is troubling. In calling Josh Hartnett's character a "prep school motherfucker," Odin falls prey to the same logic that he struggles to indict in his powerful final speech. Either he seeks to imply that Hugo is intrinsically evil (which the viewer would not agree with given Josh Hartnett's portrayal of the jealous and conflicted young man) or that Hugo's race and class status drove him to manipulate and demonize the lone black student on campus (115). If this is true, then the film's statement about the inability to and ignorance of describing Odin's situation in racial terms is called into question.

The text and movie adaptations also examine imperialistic notions and motives that pervade the story by focusing on Othello's eventually futile attempts to attain equal religious, political, and religious footing with his colonizers despite his position as the former slave, the outsider. In trying to understand Othello's roots, it is important to first understand the term "Moor" which he is frequently called in the play. The Norton edition explains that "a Moor was a Muslim of the mixed Berber and Arab people inhabiting northwest Africa" but since Othello is described as physically dark-skinned, it is more useful to understand the term as referring to a "sub-Saharan African" (Greenblatt 2101).

'Moor' was a synonym specifically for 'Negro' (Mafe 49). In a monumental text of its time by Leo Africanus known as *The Historie*, he explains that the category of the Moor encompasses two smaller sub-groups, "namely white or tawnie Moores, and Negros or black Moores" (qtd. in Mafe 50). Still, confusion remains because the term Moor in the early modern period could have described Muslims, Native Americans, Indians, fair-skinned North Africans, or Jews. Generally, the word described those who were "ethnically, culturally, and religiously" different; therefore, the term Moor was "an inclusive term applicable to racial and religious Others" (51).

As a character, Othello was a stereotype of Moorish lust and violence. Perhaps the image of lust and violence that is associated with a Moor came from the notion of Arabian harems and blood feuds. The title character of Shakespeare's tragedy is reduced at the end of the play to a jealous husband of a good Christian lady. The jealousy is what separates Othello from his Venetian self and his Cyprian self; "the jealousy that tears Othello apart manifests itself as a division between his Christian, loving, rational self, and the Muslim identity that erupts and disrupts it" (Mallin 354). The notion of the Muslim Moor was conquered by the notion of the Christian Moor; both personalities still exist inside Othello. And even though one seemed to temporarily conquer and subdue the other, the oppressed/repressed side still surfaces. The Moor does see himself as a Christian man; in fact, he refers to his conversion twice as he defends himself against Brabanzio's charges. Essentially, Othello's conversion to Christianity places him on level footing with the Christian men of Venice. This is the "most publicly recognizable sign of symbolic cleanliness or whiteness that Othello could adopt" (Saunders 168). His Christianity cleanses him and sets him aside from other dark-skinned non-Christians, such as the ones that Queen Elizabeth banished from her kingdom. In Parker's film, Fishbourne's Othello performs ablution before he kills his bride. This can be seen as a second baptism, or it can be seen as a religious remnant of his presumed life as a Muslim that comes to the surface despite the fact that Othello has left that life behind. Added to the images of the Arabian lanterns and the Bedouin-esque shawl that Fishbourne wears, it is clear that Parker is attempting to channel the character's possible Islamic heritage. Though Othello tries to maintain equal religious footing with the rest of the Venetian men, his Moorish-Islamic roots still seem to rise up as an insuppressible part of his identity, perhaps illustrating that even the most convincing attempts at civilizing the Other still leave certain latent indigenous behaviors behind.

Othello also attempts to achieve political equality with the Venetian elite, but his struggle is undermined by Iago's imperialist mindset. In discussing an Indian adaptation of *Othello*, Rustom Bharucha compared Othello and Iago's social positions, positing Iago as a Brahmin possibly enraged by a lower-caste Othello who is trying to rise in rank (Bharucha 18). This is an apt comparison since Iago is already envious of Michael Cassio's rise to power when he feels that he is better suited for the job. It is not much of a stretch to suppose that he is mistrustful of Othello's authority not because he doubts that he is unqualified, but simply due to his hate for the Moor – the same hate that is not based on ideology since the ideology was only just emerging at the time. Also telling is Iago's suspicion that Othello slept with Emilia: "I do suspect the lusty Moor / Hath leapt into my seat" (2.3.282-83). Though the footnote explains that this is a purely sexual reference, perhaps it can also be applied to the political stage in Venice. Othello, an outsider, a foreigner, has succeeded in entering Venice and taking over a high post of command that would have otherwise gone to a man like Iago or Michael Cassio. Socially, Iago goes along with the admiration toward Othello but inwardly he is seized with jealousy. Even as he poses as the confidante and friend, he is the scheming nemesis. He plays on Othello's worst fears of being the outsider, the Other, and in that sense one can argue that

Iago motivates Othello "not by jealousy but by his experience of alienation as a stranger in a strange land" (Burt 219). This idea of difference and possible superiority is illustrated through costume design in Parker's adaptation of *Othello*. Lawrence Fishbourne's Othello is always dressed in loose, billowing, robe-like garments of dark color while Kenneth Brannagh's Iago wears tan leather, which emphasizes how far removed he is from the natural earth that Othello is seen to embrace in his light garments. After all, Iago's clothes come from animals that were slaughtered, their hides carefully tanned to create the leather. Othello wears less heavy, more elemental clothes that do not appear to shield him from nature; he is closer to the earth than Iago could ever hope to be by wearing dead animals on his body (Aldama 203). As he schemes to put Othello in his proper place – a disgraced, lowered state – Iago is seen to "best [reveal] the violent, disciplinary force that is the…foundation of that "civilizing" process" (Saunders 151).

Though it is worthwhile to examine the notions of race and imperialism separately in adaptations of *Othello*, one must remember that the two are in fact inextricably linked. Imperialism can be based on racist notions while racism can have imperialistic undertones in a desire to suppress or keep down. The play – as well as its two pertinent adaptations – does an excellent job addressing the intersection. Historically, the expulsion of Jews and Moors from Spain and then the rest of the Europe hinted at imperialist aspirations. Clothing laws, and other such restricting statutes, were implemented throughout England in an attempt to create a homogenized Christian nation. Europe's attempt to "conquer and shape other people in their own image" is seen to be the birth of modern racism (Mallin 353). In this sense, is impossible to separate racism and imperialism into two distinct forces. Even when that technique was attempted in this discussion, the issues of race transitioned easily into the forces of imperialism, hinting at an underlying parallel structure between the two.

Regarding Moors and the British specifically, it is important to realize that the relationship was exceedingly complex. The English fluctuated back and forth between attraction and repulsion in reference to the Muslim Moors. Certain aspects of the Islamic culture were admired and revered throughout England and early modern Europe, yet Muslims were treated as objects of envy and fear. England's conflicted Islamophobia naturally reflected issues of both race (in terms of religion) and imperialism. The concept of sliding back and forth on a spectrum of fear and admiration is nicely reflected in the final scene of Parker's "Othello." Wounded but not dead, Iago crawls onto the bed where the corpses of Emilia, Desdemona, and Othello lay. Before the camera can fade out completely, he can be seen reaching almost passionately toward Othello, the Moor that he so hated. The link between racism and imperialism is also briefly touched upon in Nelson's "O." Desi and O playfully discuss the ramifications of the word "nigger" as they lie in bed together. Later in the film, Hugo passes Odin three lines of cocaine and tells him that when Mike and Desi are together, they call him "nigger." A single tear rolls down Odin's cheek as he fervently insists, "Desi would never say that" ("O"). The viewer is at once reminded of the earlier scene involving this graphic term in which Desi said that her people invented the word. "Nigger" as a racist term was clearly developed by a person or group that did not see themselves as "niggers." It is a word entirely external to the people it describes. And in such a way, it evokes reactions of anger and self-loathing from Odin as he buries his head in his hands and tries to come to grips with the new information (Semenza 114). The word is used as much to control and denigrate the race in question as actual military modes of imperialism.

Another interesting motif to consider regarding race and imperialism in Nelson's "O" is the basketball game. Many critics have ridiculed the director for reducing bloody, strategic warfare to a high school sport. But the analogy is cleverly constructed and surprisingly poignant. Nelson and one of his friends worked very carefully to create the various plays used by Duke (a reference to the Venetian ruler that hears Brabanzio's case against Othello as well as to coach Bobby Knight) throughout the movie. In each of the plays, Hugo is the "screen" or "decoy" which truly illustrates his secondary nature on the team. Yet without him, Odin and Michael would not be able to set up the plays and sink baskets. The racial politics of the sport are also incredibly significant to the racial and imperialist motifs at work in *Othello* and "O." Professional basketball features mostly African American players led by white coaches in front of audiences composed of mostly white spectators. At the high school level, Odin is the only black man on the court and is surrounded by white players. He is the star – "the black star," as the lyrics to the accompanying upbeat urban song proclaim – and is guided by his white coach to play in front of his all-white class. At one point in the film, Odin asks Dean Brable why the school worked so hard to recruit him and Duke immediately answered that it was because he was good, referring specifically to his skills on the basketball court. In a sense, Odin was taken from his home and relocated to a prep school in South Carolina to play basketball and enable the school to win its twentieth state championship in its 115-year history – just like his African American ancestors were brought in from Africa and made to work on the plantations for their white masters.

This American twist of slavery and basketball ties neatly into a significant visual element present throughout the entire film: the American flag. The flag dominates the basketball court, the pep rally, and the façade of the school itself. The court is painted in red, white, and blue and the basketball uniforms correspond perfectly. At the after-party, the gymnasium is filled with red and blue balloons; red and blue lights dominate the photography of the scene as a white spotlight moves about the room and focuses on key characters. When Odin comes to Desi's dorm room to give her the scarf, he is wearing blue track pants and a dark red sweatshirt. In Duke's office, the emblem of the American bald eagle hangs proudly near the red and blue posters. Even in Hugo's dorm room as Hugo and Odin snort their cocaine, one can see that the fitted sheets on the mattresses are patterned in red, white and blue plaid. Not only does this imagery remind the viewer that this is a uniquely American twist on a classic Elizabethan tale; the flag imagery also brings to mind notions of the American dream. This association is troublesome because it creates problematic questions: Who is the American dream for? Is it for the rich "white prep school motherfuckers"? Is it for hard-working men like Odin who are trying to make a name for themselves? Is the American dream of working hard and being rewarded inherently an illusion due to the fact that the country was built on the backs of its slaves? Such issues of race and imperialism figure in powerfully throughout the entire film, but are never more prevalent than during the basketball games held under the banner of the American flag.

Race when applied specifically to Shakespeare's *Othello,* however, becomes problematic. To say that *Othello* is a clearly racist play that supports notions of white/Christian supremacy is to only understand one part of the argument. But then to deny that the play contains any trace of racist thought is to miss the entire argument. What is significant here is to understand that *Othello* as a play does not oppose racism. Instead, more disturbingly, it "illuminates the process by which…visceral superstitions were implanted in the very body of…culture…Othello shows that another name for this racist implantation is "the civilizing process"" (Saunders 164). Civilization – a term synonymous in some senses with imperialism – can be seen as inherently racist because it assumes that the lifestyle and custom of a race of people is not sufficient and inherently lacking in some component that is ably illustrated by the civilizing/imperialist force.

Shakespeare's *Othello*, Parker's "Othello," and Nelson's "O" all examine notions of racism and imperialism and elegantly illustrate the intertwined nature of the two forces. The title character struggles against cultural racial stereotypes throughout the play, specifically the notion that he contaminates his fair-skinned peers with his very presence. Despite his struggles to assert his equality in religious, political and social terms, Othello is still undermined by the imperialist figure of Iago who eventually conquers him with his manipulations and schemes. These issues of race and imperialism go together very well in that it is at times impossible to separate the two in both the play and the movie adaptations. Together, Shakespeare, Parker, and Nelson give their audiences much to consider regarding how perceived notions of race and racial superiority can reflect off each other and shape human behavior and cultural mindset.

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One Response

HONDATA *on September 1, 2010 at 4:38 am* | *Reply*

If it wasn't for me having to scroll down forever to post a comment, I would have given this post a "10". Keep up the great job on the site either way. All my best.

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