Othello's African American Progeny
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Derrida writes, “there’s no racism without a language.”¹ I take this to mean that racism—and all the violence historically associated with it—is generated by language. Racial difference is not genetically “real,” nor is it grounded in real experience but is a product of verbal conditioning.² Racism cannot long survive without the verbal and symbolic apparatus that generates and sustains it: the names, the jokes, the plays, the speeches, the casual exchanges, the novels. In short, racism is a cultural virus that is verbally transmitted and its antidote must therefore be verbally administered as well.

Othello—along with the many African American texts it has inspired—provides a running record of Western civilization’s attempt to confront what Paul Robeson called “the problem of my own people.” Othello, he said, “is a tragedy of racial conflict, a tragedy of honor, rather than jealousy.”³

As such, the play has traumatized African American literature, and indeed Western culture at large, for most of its existence. The racist’s nightmare of biracial sexual relationships between white women and black males, which Gunnar Myrdal claimed suffered “the full fury of anti-amalgamation sanctions,”⁴ is the paradigm for three great revisions—“three rewritings”—of the myth: Native Son by Richard Wright, Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison, and Dutchman, by Amiri Baraka.⁵ Briefly, Wright restages and reinterprets the problematic relationship of Othello and Desdemona; Ellison represents it comically; and Baraka reverses or inverts it. We might note in passing that many literary works have been written that deal with unwanted sexual attentions of white males sometimes violently imposed on African American females; among these works are many slave narratives, including Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, as well as a number
of celebrated novels such as Uncle Tom's Cabin, Puddn'head Wilson, Quicksand, Oxherding Tale, Beloved, and Absalom, Absalom! James Kinney claims that interracial sexual relations flourished in colonial and antebellum America and that the violent response to miscegenation began only in the 1830s, "when the economics of slavery led to [the] systematic justification [of slavery] based on innate irreconcilable 'racial differences'" (xii). In any case, the vast number of nineteenth- and twentieth-century works that feature the fate of mulattoes in American culture provides graphic evidence that miscegenation has long been on the minds of African and European American authors alike. What we get in Shakespeare's play and the African American works under investigation here is, of course, the typical patriarchal perspective on the cultural trauma of miscegenation in the West. Another article representing women's perspectives on this trauma needs to be written.

Robeson's statement that Othello "is a tragedy of racial conflict," would probably have seemed self-evident to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, both in terms of the social background and the performance and interpretation of the play. A score of historical studies in the last thirty years has unearthed evidence proving that the response to Africans and Moors in the seventeenth century, before the advent of institutional slavery, was complicated and problematic. Sylvan Barnet has shown in a masterful new essay on the performance history of the play that "the Elizabethans thought of Moors as black" (274). Barnet and Errol Hill, in his Shakespeare in Sable, have demonstrated conclusively that Othello's part was played in blackface, corkface actually, well into the nineteenth century, because blacks were thought of as inappropriate for or incapable of playing the role. A single quotation from Coleridge indicates what the problem was by the time of the romantics:

Can we suppose [Shakespeare] so utterly ignorant as to make a barbarous negro plead royal birth? . . . [N]egroes [were] then known but as slaves. . . . No doubt Desdemona saw Othello's visage in his [Othello's] mind; yet, as we are constituted, and most surely as an English audience was disposed in the beginning of the seventeenth century, it would be something monstrous to conceive this beautiful Venetian girl falling in love with a veritable negro. It would argue a disproportionateness, a want of balance in Desdemona, which Shakespeare does not appear to have in the least contemplated. (qtd. in Barnet 273-74)
Thus, by the nineteenth century, when the barbarities of "the peculiar institution" of slavery had peaked in the Western world, audiences could no longer tolerate nor would directors depict the "monstrous" sexual relationship of black males and white females on stage. To get the picture, audiences no longer needed Iago lashing up racist sentiments in the credulous Roderigo and Brabantio with incendiary remarks such as "Even now, . . . an old black ram / Is tupp'ing your white ewe"; "Y'ou'll have your daughter cover'd with a Barbary horse"; and "Your daughter and the Moor are now . . . making the beast with two backs" (1.1.88-89, 110-11, 115-17). Such explosive preconceptions were ingrained in the psyches of playgoers well before arriving at the theater. Accordingly, Othello paled and such lines were often cut in production; the Moor was played "in tawny" throughout the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century, as evidenced by the films of Olivier and Jonathan Miller. In regard to the relatively recent BBC version of the play, Jonathan Miller defended his choice of Anthony Hopkins in blackface for the Moor because, he said, "I do not see the play as being about color but as being about jealousy. . . . When a black actor does the part, it offsets the play, puts it out of balance. It makes it a play about blackness, which it is not." Now that we are recovering the black Othello, such sentiments seem a bit awkward, if not downright ludicrous. Anyone who has seen Miller's Othello or a live production in which the hero is played in blackface knows the murder scene may well evoke laughter in the audience.

From the earliest moments in Othello, the language is imbued with traditional racist sentiment and prejudice that erupt into predictable violence by the play's end, when "Chaos is come again" (3.3.92). Collective violence—read riot—is, in fact, the outcome of all the literary vehicles of the myth under investigation here, even the comic Invisible Man. The catalyst for and efficient cause of such violence in the play is Iago, perhaps the most important of all Shakespeare's notorious stage directors, with the possible exception of Hamlet. Both Iago and Hamlet are tricksters, variations, as has often been noted, on the role of the traditional fool. Iago's humor takes a peculiar turn, however. He is the racist trickster; his is the scenario that eventually defines and corners Othello exclusively in his color, a scenario like the "blueprints" for behavior the hero of Invisible Man must live with. Is Iago without motive, as he is traditionally conceived to be? In terms of the racial themes in the play, hardly! He tells us repeatedly that Othello has slept with his wife, Emilia, and whether this is the case or not is irrelevant; as a racist, he believes what he imagines and brilliantly
formulates his preconceptions verbally to himself and to others under his influence.

Iago fuels his nefarious plots to undermine the relationship between Othello and Desdemona by playing the bigot's game; he preys upon the vulnerability of all the players to sneaking suspicions about the behavior of the racial alien, in the long run convincing even Othello himself that he is inferior. "Rude... in speech, and little blessed with the soft phrase of peace," Othello declares himself while suing for Brabantio's daughter in marriage, although he woos and wins Desdemona with his spellbinding stories (1.3.81-82). As an alien, Othello doubts his capacities for speech and for peace. "Haply, for I am black, / And have not those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have" (3.3.264-65), he says. Brabantio, for one, is simply aghast that Desdemona has chosen "to marry one." Would his daughter "t'incure a general mock, / Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as thou—to fear, not to delight" (1.2.69-71)? The disturbed father feels certain that Othello has influenced his daughter's foul choice with powerful drugs (1.2.73-75). Centuries later, the police will assume Bigger Thomas has plied Mary Dalton with liquor before murdering her in Native Son, and Sybil is depicted as drunk when she is "raped by Santa Claus" in Invisible Man (511). Iago can even use blatant racist arguments on Othello, who does not seem to blink an eye:

Ay, there's the point; as (to be bold with you)  
Not to affect many proposéd matches  
Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,  
Whereeto we see in all things nature tends—  
Foh, one may smell in such, a will most rank,  
Foul disproportions, thoughts unnatural. (3.3.228-33)

Does not Iago suggest throughout—even directly to Othello—that Desdemona is not to be trusted because she has already committed the unpardonable sin against her "kind": the sexual choice of an alien? Even Othello accepts the argument, as is indicated by his admission that Desdemona's name and virtue have been blackened and fouled by her relationship with him: "Her name, that was as fresh / As Dian's visage, is now begrim'd and black / As mine own face" (3.3.386-87). This is a play about reputation, real and attributed, and the jealousy and passion that such "reputation" can evoke. Racism is predicated on "repute," that is, on "evil" imputed to a cultural group so conditioned by the dominant culture that the "evil" often materializes
in real behavior. Shakespeare, in fact, cleverly interweaves the themes of the destructive effects exerted by the emotions of sexual jealousy and racial bigotry in the play, both of which inflame the imagination with illusions about the "other," alienate the parties involved artificially, and lead to violent ends based on often unfounded presuppositions or prejudices about the behavior of the "other."

A number of motifs in the murder scene of the play will be echoed and revised in the African American scenarios to follow. When sexual consummation between the black male and white female is to occur in this "master trope" of white racism, we get murder instead. The murder is always witnessed in the works investigated, often, significantly, by a white woman who is presumably forewarned of the consequences of her actions—Emilia in the play and Mrs. Dalton in Native Son. Also, the murdered victims are portrayed as human beings of flesh-and-blood, not passive victims. During the scene just prior to the murder, when Desdemona asks Emilia about fidelity and admits an attraction for Lodovico, we question the credibility of the fragile purity that is usually attributed to Desdemona. Like the white women who follow in the African American novel, for example, Mary Dalton and the anonymous "sister" in the brotherhood, Desdemona is a woman with real desires and considerable courage. The murderers in these works often remark that they feel like actors in a play or figures in a dream. Othello carries a candle into the bedroom and comments that he feels like a character in a dream. In Dutchman, Lula, as we shall see, repeatedly calls the conversation she is having with Clay, her future victim, a "script."

No matter how hard critics since Bradley have tried to saddle Othello with the full burden of the guilt for his passionate crime and to view Iago as "motiveless," the play itself seems to incriminate Western society at large for its predisposition to the periodic, ritual slaughter of marginal and aboriginal groups and all whites—especially women—who consort with them. Trevor Nunn's recent controversial production at the Young Vic in London (fall 1989) unleashed the social and political possibilities of this play that have lain dormant in the text for centuries, with the exception of the powerful portrayals of Othello by Paul Robeson in the thirties and forties. Nunn's production featured American Civil War decor and uniforms to underscore the racial implications of the text, and Willard White, a black operatic baritone debuted as a huge, barrel-chested Othello. Iago, played brilliantly by Ian McKellan, entertained as he conspired with an audience of white males—Roderigo, Cassio, and Brabantio—as willing partners in his plot to murder lovers soiled in the blood feud between
races. McKellan as Iago assumed he had many willing collaborators in the audience, because Iago projects and exacerbates the deepest Western fears of the "other," of the alien free to prowl and pollute the streets of Venice. During his many soliloquies—for Iago is the most perniciously private character in all the canon—McKellan closed the shutters on the set, pulled up a chair, leaned toward the audience and told them what they had been conditioned to know and fear implicitly all their lives: a "liver lips" has been given professional preferment over him and has desired and taken his wife right from under his very nose. What's more, this "black ram," this "Barbary horse" is about to "tup" the most eligible maid in Venice and produce the "monstrous offspring" of miscegenation. Ian McKellan's Iago, like the Native American mischief maker Iagoo, was played as the sprite of malice, in this case, of racial hatred. McKellan's purpose was to arrange and realize our basest fears on stage: the ritual slaughter of a couple transgressing racial and sexual codes. The invisible theme of racism and the murder it provokes were rendered visible for all to see in this gruesome production. The scenario of European colonial history with its periodic racial assassination, rape, and riot was here dramatized; this was a history that was beginning to peak during Shakespeare's time.

In Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals, Trudier Harris has given us a book on the subject of this gruesome scenario in its most virulent form, which developed after the American Civil War during Reconstruction. The "primal crime" in a racist society, the coupling of black male and white female—either real or, most often, imagined and impugned—justifies and drives the ritual retaliation of the mutilation, castration, and lynching of black male victims in the presence of white women and children, often on Sunday afternoons and accompanied by "carnival." Harris writes:

I have defined ritual initially as a ceremony, one which by countless repetitions has made it traditional among a given group of people or within a given community. Such repetitions are homage to certain beliefs that are vital to the community. . . . To violate the inviolable, as any Black would who touched a white woman . . . is taboo. It upsets the white world view or conception of the universe. Therefore, in order to exorcise the evil and restore the topsyturvy world to its rightful position, the violator must be symbolically punished (11-12).
The horror of these events is graphically documented in the newspapers and monthlies of the times—Harper's, The Atlantic Monthly—and only then becomes the material fictionalized in the novels. Charles Herbert Stember calls "intimacy between a Negro male and a white female" the "master taboo" of white racism dating back for centuries (10).

The "primal scene" of the white racist, the "black ram ... tupping your white ewe," is recreated and revised by African American writers some 350 years after Othello in Native Son, Invisible Man, and Dutchman. Bigger Thomas is America's black "native son," raised in the sordid conditions of ghetto life on Chicago's southside. Bigger, his name screaming the rhyme with "nigger," is the all-but-inevitable product of the racist nightmare he will be made to play out in the novel. Perhaps drawing on the ultimate recognition and understanding of the racist process Othello experiences just before his suicide, Richard Wright takes Bigger through a long educational ordeal under the tutelage of Max, his lawyer. However, the primal scene and crime—the sexual relationship between black male and white female and its reputedly inevitable consequence, the brutal murder of the white female—is reenacted with gruesome precision as the pivotal moment in the novel. Othello is momentarily accepted by Venetian society as an equal and, through the machinations of Iago, is reduced to acting the part of the alien "Turk" or "African" by the play's end. Bigger, however, is destined to act the "young Turk" immediately, replicating the violent image of the "African" he watches on the silver screen in films like Trader Horn every Saturday afternoon. As Wright explains in his introduction to the novel, "How Bigger was Born," his hero "is a product of a dislocated society; he is a dispossessed and disinherited man," and his violence is predictable and inevitable (xx). However, risking "premature closure," Wright proceeds beyond the murder early in the novel to show that this violence, however misguided on Bigger's part, has spawned in his hero a new understanding of his life and destiny by the novel's end. After his conviction and reconciliation with Jan, the fiancé of the woman he has murdered, Bigger becomes what every Venetian wants to believe Othello is at the beginning of the play: aware, self-reflective, and bold.

Having been thrown by an accidental murder into a position where he had sensed a possible order and meaning in his relations with the people about him; having accepted the moral guilt and responsibility for that murder because it had made him feel free for the first time in his life, [Bigger realizes]... a new pride and a new humility
would have to be born in him, a humility springing from a new identification with some part of the world in which he lived. (255-56)

Bigger is from the modern “Cyprus”—the slums of south Chicago; the Daltons, of course, are “Venetians”—from the suburbs. The ideological rivalry between the Turk and the Christian has been displaced by the confrontation between the Communists and capitalists in the novel. Moreover, Mary’s father, Mr. Dalton, as a wealthy slum landlord, is, like Brabantio, a true “Senator,” that is, Iago quips, “a villain” (1.1.18-19). Mary Dalton, like Desdemona, is thrilled by what she imagines to be the primitive power of Bigger’s race. To be sure, Mary is more aggressive in her pursuit of Bigger as an exotic than Desdemona is in her relationship with Othello, ostensibly because she, under the influence of Jan, is sympathetic with his political plight: “[T]his rich girl walked over everything, put herself in the way, and, what was strange beyond understanding, talked and acted so simply and directly she confounded him” (56). Mary asks her boyfriend, “Say, Jan, do you know many Negroes? I want to meet some... They have so much emotion! What a people! If we could ever get them going... And their songs—the spirituals! Aren’t they marvelous?” (76). The white heroine in each of our “stories” becomes increasingly aggressive in pursuing her black lover, violently so, as we shall see, in Dutchman.

The sexuality of Desdemona has always been a moot question. As I suggested earlier, critics have debated just how aggressive and even promiscuous she is in her obvious interest in and pursuit of Othello.16 There is no doubt that Mary Dalton, stimulated perhaps by all her drinking that evening, has sex on her mind just prior to the death scene in the novel, although Wright makes it clear that very little sexual contact occurs and that there certainly is no rape, no sexual consummation whatsoever, in spite of the lurid “reports” in the Chicago newspapers. Mary sidles up to Bigger in the car drunk, garters showing, her scent arousing him, her breath, like Desdemona’s in the death scene, on his face:

She was resting on the small of her back and her dress was pulled up so far that he could see where her stockings ended on her thighs... He helped her and his hands felt the softness of her body as she stepped to the ground. Her dark eyes looked at him feverishly from deep sockets. Her hair was in his face, filling him with its scent. (80-81)
Most significantly, in all versions of the primal scene of biracial contact and murder, witnesses to the murder are involved, either directly, as in the case of Othello, or implied, as in the case of Invisible Man. Emilia in the former and Mrs. Dalton in the latter both intrude on the ritual murder, which in each of the works begins as a sexual encounter. In both cases white females who are blind to their own husband’s evil witness the murder. My point here, and perhaps this is the point of the biracial myth I am trying to identify, is that sexual encounters between the races are not private moments as they would be in normal relationships. They represent a public shattering of the racist taboo and as such demand an audience whose predisposition toward the event alters its outcome in violent, ritualistic ways. Once that audience appears, the deed can run its grue-some course.

In both Othello and Native Son, the females are passive when they are murdered, in every sense sacrificial victims to what might be interpreted psychologically as the demands of the mythos—the script being enacted through their characters and witnessed by the onstage audience. It is significant that Iago is always played as an eavesdropper, whose access to private moments allows him to reinterpret events in a manner that will inevitably precipitate the racial violence at the play’s climax. In the Nunn production, McKellan’s Iago returns just before curtain to glare at the lovers finally united in bed—dead. Both Mary in Native Son and, as we shall see, Sybil in Invisible Man, are drugged in a sense and are thus not cognizant of their participation in this ritual event. Desdemona is nearly asleep when Othello strang-gles her. There are other similarities in the structures of Othello and Native Son that we might mention in passing. The novel has a Cassio figure in Jan and a Bianca in Bessie, and both works conclude with a judgment scene and the final appearance of the heroes, Othello and Bigger, who are given speeches underscoring the dignity and pathos of their respective characters.

Ralph Ellison sums up the problem under investigation here succinctly and comically in Invisible Man:

Why did they have to mix their women into everything? Between us and everything we wanted to change in the world they placed a woman: socially, politically, economi-
cally. Why, goddamit, why did they insist upon confusing the class struggle with the ass struggle, debasing both us and them—all human motives? (408)
The hero confronts a series of white women in *Invisible Man*, beginning with the stripper who is brought in by the elders to teach little black boys a lesson in attraction and repulsion; they are encouraged to desire sexually what they cannot have—a white woman. The stripper is as frightened as the boys, and when she performs, both parties are watched by the elders who represent the omnipresent audience cuing and skewing the interpretation of these illicit, public sexual events. There are other brief encounters between the hero and white women, one on the subway where he is pressed by the crowd up against a blond in a scene that may have sparked the imagination of Baraka, who stages his fatal biracial ritual on the subway in *Dutchman*. White women represent one of the perpetual challenges the hero faces throughout the novel along with his speeches, the accumulation of the bric-a-brac of his “heritage” in the briefcase he is perpetually trying to discard, and his run-ins with various political parties.

Ellison is perfectly aware that his hero is acting in a performance scripted with racist assumptions, and the result in the novel is usually farcical. Before his affair with the appropriately anonymous white wife of a “brother,” the hero wishes he were Paul Robeson:

> If only I were a foot taller and a hundred pounds heavier, I could simply stand before them with a sign across my chest, stating I KNOW ALL ABOUT THEM, and they’d be as awed as though I were the original boogey man—somehow reformed and domesticated. I’d no more have to speak than Paul Robeson had to act; they’d simply thrill at the sight of me. (399)

“They,” of course, are the audience intruding on the couple in each of the instances examined here. When the hero first meets this woman, she “glowed as though acting a symbolic role of life and feminine fertility” (399). The white woman here has become more solicitous than Mary Dalton and conspicuously more aggressive than Desdemona. She is almost a willing pawn in the white racist’s game. She appears by “the uncoiled fire hose” (400), and the phallic jokes abound in this chapter, just as they do in *Othello*, where Cassio quips to Iago “That he [Othello] may bless this bay with his tall ship, / Make love’s quick pants in Desdemona’s arms” (2.1.79-80) and Othello himself remarks, after he has killed his own wife on the night he is to have consummated his marriage, “Behold, I have a weapon; / A better never did itself sustain / Upon a soldier’s thigh” (5.2.259-61).

The woman’s conversation is full of erotic overtones of which she,
as opposed to her predecessors, seems perfectly aware. She is attracted to the hero by the same attributes Desdemona discovers in Othello: both are drawn to the primitive "vitality," exoticism, and strength of the African. Of the hero's ideology, she wishes to embrace "[a]ll of it, . . . to embrace the whole of it" (402). Like Desdemona, she thrills to hear the hero speak: "[S]omehow you convey the great throbbing vitality of the movement" (402). His speech is so "primitive, . . . forceful, powerful. . . . [I]t has so much naked power that it goes straight through me" (403).

The hero sees the "ivory" arms of the woman in her huge "white bed" (407), just as Othello had characterized Desdemona's skin as "whiter . . . than snow, / And smooth as monumental alabaster" (5.2.4-5). But the hero, unlike Othello, watches himself and his sexual actions replicated infinitely in the bedroom's multiple mirrors, "caught in a guilty stance, my face taut, tie dangling; and behind the bed another mirror which now like a surge of the sea tossed our images back and forth, back and forth, furiously multiplying the time and the place and the circumstance" (406). Moreover, the hero thinks he might have seen the husband of the woman at the door momentarily. He also conjectures that he might just be dreaming. Here we have the omnipresent witness to the act again as well as the suggestion that the terrible ritual of sexual contact between the races is a collective dream or nightmare. As ritual scenario, biracial sexual contact can be infinitely duplicated, reflected in the repetition of the infamous act. What has changed in Ellison's novel for the most part is the genre; Ellison replays the mating ritual of blacks and whites comically. The hero is a little man, a clown in a farce that Robeson would not dignify, and like all clowns, he is self-reflective. He sees what the audience demands even before he performs his role.

Farce gives way to high comedy in the hero's escapade with Sybil at the end of the novel. By this time the hero is perfectly aware that he is playing a role, although Sybil, his white victim, is still in the dark. She, like Mary Dalton, is intoxicated throughout the encounter, but she wants to be "raped." However, the hero has learned to manipulate the illusions of racism to his own advantage from one Rinehart, a hustler-turned-preacher on the streets of Harlem. In short, he has become his own Iago and continues to monitor himself in the mirror of others' expectations for him. Sybil, consistent with the preconceptions she has about her race and sex in the biracial context, claims to be a "nymphomaniac" (508). What other motive could she have in seeking out the sexual favors of a "black buck"? "'Threaten to kill me, if I don't give in. You know, talk rough to me, beautiful,'"
she pleads (508). "What would Rinehart do about this," the hero ponders, "and knowing," he is "determined not to let her provoke [him] to violence" (506).

Unlike Othello, his literary progenitor, Ellison’s hero will not be manipulated sexually and racially. He speculates on the motives behind the ridiculous spectacle that he and Sybil are cornered into performing to corroborate preconceptions about sexual relationships between the races: “Who’s taking revenge on whom? But why be surprised, when that’s what they [white women] hear all their lives. . . . With all the warnings against it, some are bound to want to try it out for themselves. The conquerors conquered” (509). The hero’s reaction is pity for Sybil: “She had me on the ropes; I felt punch drunk, I couldn’t deliver and I couldn’t be angry either. I thought of lecturing her on the respect due one’s bedmate in our society” (509). He realizes she thinks he is an “entertainer,” and he accepts the role temporarily. The hero, however, assumes control of the script, the blueprint, as Ellison calls it, for the spectacle. There will be no sex, no rape, no violence, no murder. He gets Sybil drunk, promising her that he “rapes real good” when he’s drunk, and scribbles across her belly with lipstick, “Sybil, you were raped by Santa Claus. Surprise!” (511).

The hero has anticipated the outcome of the tragedy he is expected to play out; he recontextualizes the encounter as comedy, and hearts and lives are spared in the process. Like the other roles the hero attempts, manipulates, and sets aside for further refinement, the “part” of Othello is played only momentarily, and its “erasure” allows the hero the opportunity to spare Sybil the mutual humiliation and injury of “raping” her. But of course, the function of comedy is to repeat in a finer tone, to recontextualize tragic situations, and to reverse tragic outcomes through reconciliation and clarification. The variation Ellison achieves in his representation of the racist mythos is a function of generic—read verbal—manipulation.

_Dutchman_ may well represent the ultimate African American revision of _Othello_. Amiri Baraka alludes to Shakespeare frequently in his works, particularly in _The Slave_, the companion piece to _Dutchman_. The myth of the ritual murder of innocent white virgins is, in _Dutchman_, fully deconstructed or inverted to reflect more accurately the relationship between the races that has existed throughout Western history. Lula—the white woman—has become the aggressor in a war overtly declared and waged between the races, and Clay is her black victim. Baraka is suggesting that the true victim in the biracial sexual struggle is the black _male_, and he is the partner who is ritually sacrificed in _Dutchman_. The setting of the play is the subway, which
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is “heaped in modern myth” (3). Clay, a poet who would be “the black Baudelaire,” watches Lula enter the car and take the seat next to him in an ironic recreation of the very action that launched the civil rights movement just ten years before the first production of the play—integration of the city transit system.

Clay, “without a trace of self-consciousness,” naively “hopes that his memory of this brief encounter will be pleasant” (4). The young black man, putty or “clay” in the hands of the white vamp, will be made to react to a taunting series of white stereotypes about black male behavior, and Lula will cue the “lines” (16) he is “supposed” (10) to say. Clay does realize early on that the “struggle” here is indeed over “abstract asses” (7) and that nothing sexual will come of this relationship. As we have seen in previous versions of the biracial sexual encounter, the act is rarely consummated. Nevertheless, Lula immediately accuses Clay, saying, “You think I want to pick you up, get you to take me somewhere and screw me, huh?” (8).

Unlike any of her predecessors, Lula knows what she is doing throughout the play—lying. “I lie a lot. It helps me control the world” (9). She tells Clay she is an actress, and he nicknames her Tallulah Bankhead. Both “players” agree they know what is “supposed to happen” between them (10). Only Lula really does, however. Lula thinks Clay is a “well-known type” (12) and proceeds to “dictate” the script, the “chronicle” as Clay calls it, of their predictable melodrama (24). Lula cues Clay throughout the play with taunts such as, “It’s your turn, and let those be your lines.” (16). She warns him, “Don’t get smart with me, Buster, I know you like the palm of my hand” (17). Lula suggests a series of stereotypes for Clay to emulate. She notices he is wearing a three-button suit, even though his grandfather had been a slave. Lula claims he does not know who he is, taunting him by saying, “I bet you never once thought you were a black nigger” (19). Clay hopes the two of them can pretend to be “free of [their] own history,” but Lula knows better (21). She has another more predictable and more violent outcome in mind. They are about to “groove,” as she announces at the end of scene 1—and they are indeed in the “groove” of the biracial ritual (21).

At the beginning of scene 2, the players are rehearsing their “codes of lust” (23). Lula will “make a map” of Clay’s “manhood” (26). She tries to pretend they are in Romeo and Juliet (26). He will call her room “black,” when they arrive there later, “like Juliet’s tomb.” But the play is not Romeo and Juliet, it is Othello revised. Lula will be no victim of jealousy and racial misunderstanding, much less a suicide-for-love at the end of the play. She is the murderer this time. The black male is
Clay wants "the whole story," and he will get it; Lula will keep "turning pages" to arrive at the ritual climax of the story (28). As the scenario unfolds, Lula realizes there is a problem here: Clay, like Othello, Bigger, and Ellison's hero, is "an escaped nigger" (29). As such, he must be exposed; she threatens him in front of an audience of middle-class businessmen that assembles in the car between scenes. These businessmen represent the ever-important witnesses to the biracial murder who will, in Baraka's version, become accomplices, and the jury judging the deed as well. Lula continues her verbal abuse: she calls Clay a "black son of a bitch," an "Uncle Thomas Woolly-Head," and an "Uncle Tom Big Lip" because he will not do the belly-rub with her (32-33). "You're afraid of white people. And your father was," she taunts (33). What follows is Clay's impassioned plea to let him live, to let him be, to let him make choices about his life, even the choice to be middle class if that is what he wants (33).

Finally angered, Clay explains why blacks should kill, but usually show restraint. Like his predecessors, Clay is ready to strangle the symbolic white female. "Such a tiny ugly throat. I could squeeze it flat, and watch you turn blue, on a humble. For dull kicks. And all these weak-faced ofays squatting around here, staring over their papers at me. Murder them too. Even if they expected it" (33). The moment of truth has arrived; the audience has been primed; but, Clay, just as Ellison's hero, refuses to play the role. Othello and Bigger have wised up in Invisible Man and Dutchman. Ellison and Baraka have revised, actually inverted, the paradigm of the biracial sexual encounter. Clay then proceeds to tell us what he and black artists do instead of killing hateful whites—they create music and poetry: "And the only thing that would cure the neurosis would be your murder. Simple as that. I mean if I murdered you, then other white people would begin to understand me. You understand? . . . If Bessie Smith had killed some white people she wouldn't have needed that music. She could have talked very straight and plain about the world. No metaphors" (35). In short, the "[c]razy niggers [are] turning their backs on sanity. When all it needs is that simple act. Murder. Just murder! Would make us all sane" (35). But he "wearies" and counters his own argument. "Ahhh. Shit. But who needs it? I'd rather be a fool. Insane. Safe with my words, and no deaths, and clean, hard thoughts, urging me to new conquests. My people's madness" (35).

At this point, Baraka tells us that Lula's "voice takes on a different, more businesslike quality." She concludes, "I've heard enough" (36)
and stabs Clay with an impunity that might well have anticipated that of Bernard Goetz. The businessmen on the car then “come and drag Clay’s body down the aisle” (34). In Othello and Native Son, the citizens of Venice and Chicago are violently outraged about the murders of Desdemona and Mary Dalton, but the murder of Clay in Dutchman is virtually ignored. Lula’s next young victim then enters the car and the ritual begins again, but not before an old black conductor tips his hat to Lula and shuffles down the aisle exiting the train, a survivor in the struggle, like Ellison’s “moon-mad” war veterans in Invisible Man (132).

Baraka knows precisely what he is up to here, and in The Slave, a companion play usually reprinted with Dutchman, he tells us all about it. In this play, Easely, a white professor, argues politics with Walker Vessels, a former black theater student, and Grace, Easley’s wife, listens in. Grace announces that “Mr. Vessels is playing the mad scene from Native Son,” when Walker mentions having played a “second-rate Othello” in college: “Grace there was Desdemona . . . and you [Easely] were Iago . . . [Laughs] or at least between classes, you were Iago . . . . If a white man is Iago when you see him . . . uhh . . . chances are he’s eviler when you don’t.” Grace, like Lula, tells Vessels to shut up, but, like Clay in Dutchman, Vessels refuses (57-58).

Black writers have revised the biracial sexual myth that represents the primal impediment to the freedom and equal treatment of black people as human beings. Sexual parity is the ultimate expression of racial equality. If language inscribes racial difference and dissension, and then ascribes or even prescribes behavior based on that inscription, perhaps it may also de-scribe such behavior, or at least rewrite the story as it exists in the Western mind. Obviously such a hope informs the rereading and representation of the crucial myth of biracial relationship discussed here.

The philologist Leo Spitzer offers us some help. The problem of “race,” the great problem of our century according to W. E. B. DuBois, might indeed hinge on the misunderstanding of a single word: the word “race” itself. In his inimitable fashion Spitzer, as linguistic sleuth, traces the word “race” through its German, French, Italian, and English uses and abuses to the Latin root ratio. The concept of race, and perhaps the attitudes associated with racism, are all locked up in this term ratio, perhaps most artfully wielded by Thomas Aquinas in his Summa: “God, in willing himself, wills all the things which are in himself; but all things in a certain manner preexist in him by their types (rationes)” (qtd. in Spitzer 147). Spitzer explains, “Thus rationes is a rendering of ideai and can shift to the meaning ‘types’
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[which becomes ‘races’] precisely because all the different rationes of things are integrated in the creator of things” (148). Rationes or “races” may be conceived, then, as figments of the collective mind derived from what are presumed to be God’s categories of human existence. Spitzer concludes, “What a significant comment this affords on the modern ‘racial’ beliefs!” (152).

If “race” is a platonic concept, existing in genres and not in genes, existing in subjective human judgments rather than in the “nature of things” and if it is historically conditioned instead of “predetermined,” then this notion, this “idea,” can be changed, can be modified, can be adapted to new circumstances and experience. Through language, which gave us the notion of “race” in the first place, we can model a new reality, a reality that reverses outcomes posited as necessities in the racist mentality. Through the clever manipulation of the language of traditional character and circumstance, the writers under investigation here, Shakespeare included, have helped us perceive new solutions to a problem that remains catastrophically troublesome in the modern world, the problem of racial violence.

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NOTES

1Derrida continues, “The point is not that acts of racial violence are only words, but rather that they have to have a word. [Racism] institutes, declares, writes, inscribes, prescribes” (Derrida 331).

2Tzvetan Todorov writes, “[W]hereas racism is a well-attested social phenomenon, ‘race’ itself does not exist! Or, to put it more clearly: there are a great number of physical differences among human groups, but these differences cannot be superimposed; we obtain completely divergent subdivisions of the human species according to whether we base our description of the ‘races’ on an analysis of their epidermis or their blood types, their genetic heritages or their bone structures. For contemporary biology, the concept of ‘race’ is therefore useless” (370-71).

3Quoted in Barnet 280. For an honest history of Robeson’s reactions to his roles in the two great productions of Othello in which he starred (London, 1930, and New York, 1943) and the pronounced racial implications of and reactions to these productions, see Martin Duberman’s biography of Robeson (134, 263). Some items of interest: Peggy Ashcroft, who played Desdemona in the London production, found her entire experience in Othello (1930) “an education in racism,” particularly the public reaction to the kissing scenes between Desdemona and Othello (134-35); significant passages from the play were cut by the director, Nellie Van Volkenburg, who Ashcroft decided was a “racist” because of her treatment of Robeson. The murder scene was staged with the bed tucked inconspicuously away in a corner of the room, and the light was so dimmed to the point of “inscrutability” that Ralph Richardson, who played Iago, kept a flashlight up his sleeve to negotiate the stage after his departure (136). The attempt to take
the production to the United States was virtually sabotaged, and when it was
produced here in 1943, it provoked broad racial protest, especially in the southern
states (265).

4Gunnar Myrdal writes, “The illicit relations freely allowed or only frowned upon
are, however, restricted to those between white men and Negro women. A white
woman’s relation with a Negro man is met by the full fury of anti-amalgamation
sanctions” (56).

5Baraka’s play is given in the list of works cited under his original name, Leroi
Jones, as it is in the original edition of the play used for this article.

6I am in debt here to an anonymous reader for SAR who provided this list of novels
dealing with our theme and who suggested especially that Charles Johnson’s Ox-
herding Tale offers “first a kind of mock acknowledgement of the myth of the su-
persexual black male, and then [completely dismantles] the tradition . . . of its original
fears, prejudices, and taboos.”

7Kinney goes on to discuss some sixty novels of the nineteenth and early twentieth
centuries with the theme of miscegenation, novels by luminaries in the canon
including James Fenimore Cooper, William Gilmore Simms, George Washington Cable,

8The reevaluation of Othello in its historical context is well underway at this point.
I am much indebted to Emily Bartels’s “Making More of the Moor: Aaron, Othello, and
Renaissance Refashionings of Race.” Bartels’s article as well as my own are products of
a seminar on “Shakespeare’s Aliens” convened at the 1988 meeting of the Shakespeare
Association of America by Edward Berry. On the matter of race, see Phyllis Braxton’s
recent article, “Othello: The Moor and the Metaphor,” which argues “that Othello’s
color outweighs in significance the element of race” (1). According to Braxton,
Shakespeare leaves the matter of Othello’s ethnic identification deliberately ambigu-
ous but ominous, because “the Other is always mysterious and without clear definition.
Once defined, he is no longer the Other” (9).

9See, for instance, the studies of Barthelemy, Braxton, Brown, Dabydeen, D’Amico,
Hulme, Hunter, Eldred D. Jones, Jordan, Loomba, Miller, Pratt, Said, and Tokson.

10Black actors, too, have been strongly attracted to the role because, as Hill suggests,
the play offers “an opportunity vividly to convey to audiences the message that racism
is the green-eyed monster that destroys not just its victim but also its perpetrator and
innocent bystanders who fall into its clutches” (41).

11For other indignant, clearly racist reviews of nineteenth-century performances of
the play, see Ruth Cowhig’s essay (14-20).

12All quotations from the plays are taken from The Riverside Shakespeare.

13Quoted in Barnet 284. Miller’s sentiment typifies critical comment about all of
Shakespeare’s plays dealing with the problem of “complexion”—Titus Andronicus, The
Merchant of Venice, and Othello. For instance, both Frank Kermode and Alvin Kernan
ignore racial themes altogether in their respective introductions to Othello in The
Riverside Shakespeare and the 1987 Signet edition of the play. Kermode does use inter-
esting language to discuss other issues arising in the text, however: “The whiteness of
Desdemona blackened, we see the white and tranquil mind of Othello darkened by
atavistic shock and disgust. . . . He has behaved like a Turk (used throughout the play
as an enemy of civility and grace, a type of cunning and disorder). He has become that
person of different ‘clime, complexion, and degree’ whom it was wanton of Desde-
mona to marry” (The Riverside Shakespeare 1201). Braxton claims Miller was trying “to
minimize the differences between Othello and Desdemona” by using Anthony Hopkins
in the role (2-3 and 14).
See, however, Wayne Holmes’s article. Holmes goes so far as to suggest “that Desdemona and Cassio, some time prior to Desdemona and Othello’s marriage, had an affair” (1).

Harris speculates, “Almost all of the deaths [by ritual lynchings] have as their causes the improper interactions of black males and white females. But what happened in depictions after 1968? Are black writers now beginning to suggest that black males and white females can interact with each other without some fatal violence occurring?” (xii). In another passage she writes, “Historically, in their ritualistic lynchings of black people, white Americans were carrying out rites of exorcism in which they seemed determined to eradicate the black ‘beast’ from their midst, except when he existed in the most servile, accommodationist, and helpful of positions” (xiii).

Howard Felperin, for one, is so incensed by Holmes’s suggestion (cited in note 14 above) that Desdemona might be more “experienced” than we usually suppose her, that he charitably leaves the author of the article “unnamed for reasons by now apparent” (3).

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Baraka, Amiri. See Leroi Jones.


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