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# “She Never Yet was Foolish that was Fair”: Whiteness as Erasure in William Shakespeare’s *Othello*

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While an important topic for discussion today in Shakespearean criticism, race has not always been deemed an appropriate or engaging topic for critics of the bard’s work. William Shakespeare’s *Othello*, however, has been involved in discussions immersed in critical race theory to some degree since the emergence of the topic in the field. These discussions are generally inspired by the politicized reading of Othello’s position as a widely acknowledged raced body both in the written play and its adaptations through the years. Critics have rather consistently chosen to look at Othello’s body and the reactions to it as the source for the racial tension created in the play, but what has been discussed less frequently is Desdemona’s position as a raced body and how her embodiment of whiteness is a source of this tension. The definition of whiteness that aligns with the goals of this paper most closely comes from Zeus Leonardo. In his article, “The Souls of White Folk: Critical Pedagogy, Whiteness Studies, and Globalization Discourse,” Leonardo writes that whiteness is “a racial discourse, whereas the category ‘white people’ represents a socially constructed identity, usually based on skin color” (Leonardo 169). Close examination of the ways whiteness, particularly in regard to Desdemona, operates within this text exposes whiteness as a tool for the erasure of Othello’s racial identity.

The whiteness of Desdemona as a problematic tool for erasure has been relatively overlooked; her white skin renders her invisible and labels her unraced to many of the critics of the white-dominant world of literary criticism – even to those who have dedicated time to discussing the racial situation in *Othello*. In the first chapter of his book, Richard Dyer points out the lack of discussion surrounding whiteness in white culture and the simultaneous focus of that culture’s representations of non-whites. Dyer asserts, “We may be on our way to genuine hybridity, multiplicity without (white) hegemony, and it may be where we want to get to – but we aren’t there yet, and we won’t get there until we see whiteness, see its power, its particularity and limitedness, put it in its place and end its rule. This is why

studying whiteness matters” (Dyer 1997, 4). Dyer spends part of this chapter addressing the concept of race and focuses in on his assertion that whiteness has invisibility in a culture where whiteness dominates. The observations made by Dyer align with my own reading of *Othello* and the criticism on it. Many critics have dedicated their time to the characterization of Othello as the crux of the problem in the play. This paper is not claiming that Othello’s character and the choices he makes throughout the play are not problematic. However, the erasure that is occurring throughout the play at the hands of whiteness as a largely overlooked issue in this play is equally problematic. I argue that the whiteness of this play, specifically Desdemona’s whiteness (her formal and casual language, the way she presents herself in his presence, and how she responds to the other white bodies on stage), causes the ultimate deterioration of Othello’s mental state. Desdemona uses her embodied whiteness to magnify Othello’s insufficiencies and prove to the other characters that a Moor will become violent with *anyone*, including his virtuous, fair, perfect bride. Simultaneously, Desdemona absolves herself of her position within this destructive, anti-black narrative through her use of colorblind language and ideology. Colorblindness, a solution to racism that has proven to be just as much a cause for concern as blatant racism, works as an erasure of cultures that have been assigned the term “other.” Desdemona employs colorblind language consistently, but most importantly it is used when she is discussing her devotion to Othello. Desdemona’s whiteness works as an erasure of Othello’s racial identity as her character is an active participant in this anti-black narrative by utilizing colorblind language and casual racism throughout the play.

Contemporary performances of *Othello*, such as the 2019 Stratford Shakespeare Festival production, highlight the whiteness that surrounds Desdemona as part of her character, and what’s more is some directors use Desdemona’s position as a white woman to point to a character who portrays a source of light for this tragedy. Director Nigel Shawn Williams has a note in the playbill of the 2019 Stratford Shakespeare Festival<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that there have been many productions that have abandoned the traditionally written *Othello* of William Shakespeare. For example, Toni Morrison published an adaptation titled *Desdemona* that was performed beginning in 2011 in Vienna. In this adaptation, Desdemona is the protagonist. This was done before in Paula Vogel’s 1993 *Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief* and Ann-Marie MacDonald’s 1988 *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning*

production of *Othello*. In the Director's Note, Williams highlights Desdemona's function in this contemporary performance. Williams asserts, "if we allowed a spirit, a life force, such as Desdemona's to flourish in our world, how much better our existence might be. The world in which *Othello* takes place does not allow this force of hope and truth and light to exist. I wonder what hope there is for such a world" (Williams 9). This quote demonstrates that Williams has equated Desdemona (and therefore whiteness) with heroism. Directors of contemporary performances of *Othello* are so fully rooted in today's readings of the dominance of whiteness that their productions then communicate to their audience. This ultimately reproduces the idea that whiteness and heroism are synonymous. The anti-blackness engrained and reproduced through society is reproduced again here, through the contemporary productions of *Othello* put on by many large theater companies, such as the Stratford Shakespeare Festival. The focus of this paper belongs to the Stratford production due in part to the size of the company, but also due to the incorporation of this company in many study abroad programs for English and theater programs and the choice to hold a conference here each year. The plays performed at Stratford Shakespeare Festival are in the spotlight from many different positionalities – academia, performance and production, and education to name a few – so the choices made by this company set a tone for contemporary readings of the play. These production choices need to be discontinued, and *Othello* needs to be discussed as it truly is – an anti-black narrative driven by Desdemona, the character who most embodies the problematics of whiteness. Desdemona, unlike the more outward, obvious villain of Iago, has a more sinister role in *Othello*'s destruction. In comparison with a character like Iago, Desdemona's comments and actions seem supportive, loving, and kind. When read in isolation, yet within the context of the scene, one can see that, while Iago is destroying *Othello* in a more apparent way, she is destroying him by working as an erasure of his identity.

Much of the discourse about the use of race in *Othello* has been focused on the racial identity of *Othello*, the only body present deemed to

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*Juliet*). Also worth mentioning are the adaptations inverting the casting – plays where *Othello* is played by a white actor and the other characters are portrayed by actors of color.

actually have race.<sup>2</sup> Some critics have established a lengthy conversation discussing the diversity of the term ‘moor’ and work to define the parameters surrounding the social construct of those characters on the stage. Jack D’Amico, Margaux Deroux, Daniel Vitkus, Matthieu Chapman, and Emily Bartels dominate the discussion of the depiction of Moors and their diversity in early modern drama. Topics of discussion include: physical and imagined qualifications of the moor, the use of religious language in relation to the moor, and the difficulty of being able to fully capture the term “Moor” in a play. Jack D’Amico focuses on the social construction of race while Margaux Deroux asserts that skin pigmentation is reflective of personality. Daniel Vitkus closely examines religious terms such as “turning Turk” throughout *Othello*, emphasizing the intricacies of the relationship between non-Christian religions and the label of “other” (in this case, Moor) while Emily Bartels looks more closely at the diversity of the term “Moor” and the difficulty it presents to writing criticism on these characters. She discusses that “while blackness and Mohammedism were stereotyped as evil, Renaissance representations of the Moor were vague, varied, inconsistent, and contradictory” (Bartels 124). She illustrates the term “Moor” as a catch-all phrase for anyone not meeting the representation of the majority “universal” body in early modern England. She coins the term “stereotype” in relation to discussions of the Moor.

In his book *Anti-black Racism and Early Modern Drama: The Other “Other”*, Matthieu Chapman discusses that Moors, while denigrated, were not any particular cause for concern in early modern England;<sup>3</sup> black people, however, were not even seen as human. He spends much of his book discussing anti-blackness and how early modern drama reflects this. I engage with anti-blackness the way Chapman discusses it in his book. He argues,

Race, when viewed only as a marker of identity, cannot then address the unmitigated violence that has been deployed by all human races against blackness...One cannot simultaneously be black and

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<sup>2</sup>What I mean here is what is discussed by critics Richard Dyer, Robin Diangelo, and Ruth Frankenberg. They have discussed the dominance of white bodies and how, because of this, most white people have deemed white bodies as “unraced” or without color; they are the absence of race.  
<sup>3</sup>Chapman is thinking of the diversity that went into the labeling of a Moor: religion, race, nationality, etc.

human; but rather these two categories construct the foundational antagonism between presence and absence that forms the basis for the symbolic order. So while ‘race’ as a marker of human identity was still in a state of flux in early modern England, race as the structural determinant of ‘human’ was already at play. (Chapman 24)

The discussion Chapman has surrounding this term gives us the language needed to think about the antiblack narrative of *Othello*. The approach other characters in the play take when addressing this protagonist illustrates this idea of “symbolic order” through the power the audience sees whiteness having over the black body of Othello.

While discussing the racial discourse surrounding the body of Othello is important, the idea of the whiteness surrounding Othello is even more important yet is discussed less frequently. Critics including Vanessa Corredera, Chris Cuomo, Kim Hall, Arthur Little, and Ian Smith have expanded the discourse of race in *Othello* by discussing whiteness in some capacity, but they have largely left Desdemona’s whiteness undisturbed. The topics of discussion have included terms deemed inseparable from race, white melancholia/fragility, the projection of whiteness onto objects,<sup>4</sup> and the alignment of whiteness with ideas of beauty. Vanessa Corredera explores several terms (religion, heritage, and culture) that white critics and readers continuously deem inseparable from race.<sup>5</sup> Arthur Little, Chris Cuomo, and Kim Hall discuss the white melancholia and fragility that motivates white scholars in their endeavor to discuss race, and Ian Smith argues that the objects present (like Desdemona’s handkerchief) complicate race even further. Kim Hall discusses how beauty and fairness continually align with the idea of whiteness. It is Kim Hall’s discussions that lead me to recognize the lack of representation of Desdemona within the racial conversation. This is likely due to the oneness between Desdemona’s sense of self and her whiteness that is so engrained in today’s racial conversation. According to Richard Dyer, Ruth Frankenberg, and Robin DiAngelo, whiteness is seen as invisible to those identifying as white.

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<sup>4</sup> Ian Smith argues that the objects present (like Desdemona’s handkerchief) complicate race even further.

<sup>5</sup> In his introduction, Matthieu Chapman also makes note of the “intersecting notions of blackness, race, gender, nation, religion, and numerous other categories of difference that informed notions of blackness in the period” (Corredera 2013, 2).

They have deemed themselves “unraced” and outside of racial discourse. It is this “unraced” ideal that has led to a lack of discussion surrounding Desdemona’s race.

Celia Daileader, Laura Bovilsky, and Brigitte Fielder are just a few scholars who have chosen to include Desdemona’s body in the racial discourse of *Othello*. They have spent time discussing how gender and sexuality complicate the conversation of race. Daileader’s reading of Desdemona does not race Desdemona, but instead discusses Desdemona’s position in an interracial marriage.<sup>6</sup> Celia Daileader discusses six texts from the early modern period that contain interracial couples. She decides on three “rules” that encompasses a majority of the inter-racial couples she talks about, the most important to my own paper is the rule that “inter-racial sex never involves a consenting and a sympathetic white woman” (Daileader 17). Similarly, in “Desdemona’s Blackness,” Bovilsky asserts that race and sexuality are continuously intertwined. Because of this, Desdemona is considered “black” through her marriage to Othello. Brigitte Fielder’s “Blackface Desdemona: Theorizing Race on the Nineteenth-Century American Stage” continues the ideas of Bovilsky, arguing that the easily transferrable blackface makeup of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is symbolic for this blackening of Desdemona’s “as a result of interracial sexuality” (Fielder 40). But this blackness masquerading as the sexual undoing of Desdemona is not what makes her a problematic character. Instead, it is Desdemona’s whiteness (as a racial identity prior to her metaphorical blackening via interracial marriage) that works as erasure of Othello’s racial identity in this scene – especially when placed alongside the senate scene and her death scene. Desdemona’s language is a constant reminder that she should not continue to be viewed in the way that many of today’s directors and scholars have interpreted her character – that is, in that martyred sense implied through discussions and stage productions of her character. Desdemona’s language and actions are a conduit for the whiteness that works as erasure of Othello’s racial identity,

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<sup>6</sup> This is important as I will be discussing whether Desdemona truly is a sympathetic character. For characters such as Tamora in *Titus Andronicus*, it is clear that the character is not truly a sympathetic character due to her universally recognized villainous deeds. For a character like Desdemona, a reader has to dig much deeper and read much closer to uncover these deeds.

and that needs to be exposed more visibly through contemporary performance.

The first moment the audience sees Desdemona's whiteness working as erasure of Othello's racial identity occurs in Act I, Scene III – the moment when Desdemona and Othello are defending their marriage to the Duke, Brabantio, and the senate. Othello gives his own version of the story before Desdemona walks in, and Brabantio demands a verbal affirmation from Desdemona that she has consented to marry Othello. Desdemona informs everyone present that, “I saw Othello's visage<sup>7</sup> in his mind, / And to his honours and his valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate” (I.III. 251-253). The audience is queued in here to be mindful of Desdemona's place within the racial politics they are witnessing. Desdemona has very specifically not mentioned Othello's appearance, heritage, religion, or anything related to his status as a Moor. This choice of words is extremely intriguing; Desdemona has announced to everyone that she is in love with Othello and she loves him for the “visage in his mind” (I.III.251). In her language, Desdemona has demonstrated that she has looked past the literal visage of Othello – who possesses the face of a Moor – and has found love for the man behind the face. By neglecting to tell her father and the Duke that she loves Othello in his entirety, she has begun his erasure. Earlier in this scene, while defending himself to the council, Othello gives a statement that further works to the detriment of his visage.

She wished she had not heard it, yet she wished  
That heaven had made her such a man. She thanked me,  
And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,  
I should but teach him how to tell my story,  
And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake.  
She loved me for the dangers I had passed,  
And I loved her that she did pity them. (I. III. 187-194)

This portion of his testimony, which seems innocent enough, includes some major problematic moments. He mentions that her comment “if I had a friend that loved her” was a hint that she loved him (I. III. 190). When

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<sup>7</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary defines visage as “the face or features as expressive of feeling or temperament; the countenance” (OED).



considering this comment along with the comment he recalls earlier in the testimony (“she wished/that heaven had made her such a man”), and the comment Desdemona herself later makes regarding Othello’s visage, one brings her morals into question. Is that first comment, rather than a hint, a true statement that she would rather be with a friend of Othello’s, one who is able to tell Othello’s story yet who has a visage that matches her own, rather than Othello himself? Othello does not see this as the case, and goes on to say that she loves him for these dangers in his story.

While what Desdemona says in Act I, Scene III aligns with contemporary ideals about love (i.e., to love someone for who they are on the inside rather than for their superficial qualities) those ideals can and do lead to colorblind language and thoughts. In Act I, Scene III, Desdemona exhibits a colorblind nature in her speech by telling her audience that she loves Othello for his mind, honor, and courage rather than his heritage, nationality, and phenotype. In “Practicing a Theory/Theorizing a Practice: An Introduction to Shakespearean Colorblind Casting,” Ayanna Thompson discusses the “popular notion that Shakespeare’s plays are ‘universal’” (Thompson 1). In this case, just as Ruth Frankenberg’s discusses,<sup>8</sup> universal means white. Frankenberg illustrates that, “Among the effects on white people both of race privilege and of the dominance of whiteness are their seeming normativity, their structured invisibility” (Frankenberg 6). Colorblind casting works in a world like the one Frankenberg is illustrating. Thompson writes that this notion “lends itself to the theory that casting agents, directors, actors, and audiences can be ‘blind’ to race, color, and/or ethnicity” (Thompson 1). This popular practice of casting has exposed a problem on the stage and in society. Colorblindness is problematic due to its erasure of the many factors that make up one’s racial identity: ethnicity, nationality, religion, and culture. This theory of colorblindness exhibited by white people works in society today by acting as erasure of people of color, and it has been reinforced through its presence on the stage. This practice is not only a contemporary one, however, as Desdemona has a colorblind ideology exhibited in the

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<sup>8</sup> Ruth Frankenberg’s *White Women, Race Matters*, details a study of white women that culminates in those women deeming themselves as “unraced,” having no color, and being the universal body.

senate scene when she mentions looking past Othello's face to love what she sees behind his face.

Desdemona's whiteness is not the only cause for concern; the Duke has taken Desdemona's erasure of Othello's identity one step further. The intricacies of this colorblind visualization of Othello is confirmed later in the scene when the Duke says, "Your son-in-law is far more fair than black" (I.III.289).<sup>9</sup> This language can be deemed as colorblind when discussing the idea that whiteness is baseline and the absence of race. Colorblind language is problematic due to its presence as a gateway to this mentality that people of color are "better" when they "act white." While the 2019 production of *Othello* at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Ontario provided a problematic portrayal of Desdemona, it was effective in communicating the harm caused by the contemporary idea that people of color should "act white." After the Duchess's<sup>10</sup> line, Michael Blake, the actor who portrayed Othello, looks away from the Duchess and Desdemona and makes eye contact with the audience. In that moment, Blake's face has a look of astonishment and anger that someone would actually say "far more fair than black." His reaction is what we, the contemporary audience, would expect if the line had been changed to say that Othello "might be black, but he acts white." While this moment brings the audience back to the present, the chosen setting for this adaptation, Blake makes a clear choice to neglect all other colorblind language in this scene, yet draws a line at this moment. The choices made here point to the contemporary solution to the colorblindness: viewing people as human beings while simultaneously respecting their culture and identity rather than priding themselves on being colorblind or asking a person of color to act more like a white person to avoid the discomfort of the white person. This harkens back to the discussion Cheryl Matias has in her paper and the discomfort white students in her classroom have had as they work through the deconstruction of whiteness (Matias). Blake's choice to look into the audience in Act I, Scene III is a choice that, if all of the other language has been lost on them, indicates how important race and colorblind language is to this particular play.

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<sup>9</sup> Referencing Frankenberg, Dyer, and DiAngelo.

<sup>10</sup> This adaptation portrayed a Duchess rather than a Duke like the written play.

Desdemona's whiteness working as erasure of Othello's racial identity in Act I, Scene III becomes more obvious through her dominance over Othello. This is seen when the other male characters of the scene wait to hear what Desdemona has to say even after Othello, a man they depend upon to win the impending war in Cyprus, has already spoken. In *White Women, Race Matters*, Frankenberg asserts, "Naming 'whiteness' displaces it from the unmarked, unnamed status that is itself an effect of its dominance" (Frankenberg 6). The court is not satisfied until Desdemona admits that Othello won her hand in a courtly manner; that is, that Desdemona agreed to marry Othello without the use of the magic they have decided his othered body must be capable of. Because of the dominance afforded her by the men in power, Desdemona sees what she has said about her love for Othello as a good thing. Dyer discusses this problematic circle of power in his book when he claims, "a white person is taught to believe that all that she or he does, good and ill, all that we achieve, is to be accounted for in terms of our individuality. It is intolerable to realise that we may get a job or a nice house, or a helpful response at school or in hospitals, because of our skin colour, not because of the unique, achieving individual we must believe ourselves to be" (Dyer 9). This circle of continually transferred power – from one white body to the next – is seen in Act I Scene III. The men wait to hear from Desdemona to proclaim their marriage lawful, she relates her feelings on their love, and as a result a majority of the white bodies in power accept the news of their consensual nuptials. In declaration of her love for him, Desdemona has strategically chosen to avoid speaking of Othello's color and focuses instead on those aspects where he has dominance over her: his military status, courage, honor from Venice, and his wits. If Desdemona were to say she loved him because of the way he looks as well, the Venetian's suspicions that Othello has corrupted her in some way will never be quenched. They know that Desdemona has dominance over Othello because of the whiteness she possesses.

In Act I Scene III, Desdemona's colorblind language and power over Othello due to her own race work toward Othello's erasure, but in Act II Scene I this erasure is seen as a result of the engrained, casual nature under which her own anti-blackness is exposed. Before her death and after defending her love for Othello, Desdemona arrives to Cyprus. Here, the

audience is introduced to a side of Desdemona that is witnessed only when she is not with Othello, communicating the casual nature with which racism is approached both in early modern drama and contemporary productions. The ease with which white bodies engage with racism stems from the inherent anti-black culture in which they are immersed. Robin DiAngelo discusses the uninhibited nature of racism “in how quickly images of brutality toward black children (let alone black adults) are justified by the white assumption that it must have been deserved” (DiAngelo 93). This image is just one quick note she makes regarding the ease with which anti-black images, stereotypes, and thoughts come rushing to the minds of bodies immersed in white culture. DiAngelo’s chapter “Anti-blackness” is littered with different ways that these anti-black sentiments effect those involved and how they have come into existence. DiAngelo spends some time focusing on the fact that it happens to even the most well-intentioned anti-racist human beings because of having been brought up in an anti-black society.

This flippant approach to racism is portrayed in Act II, Scene I; here, Desdemona arrives in Cyprus with Iago and Emilia where they engage in a witty banter littered with problematic, anti-black language. The scene has been eliminated from many adaptations of this play<sup>11</sup> due to the way it problematizes Desdemona’s character, taking her down a notch from saving grace to potential threat to Othello’s racial identity. Bovilsky uses this scene as an example of how Desdemona’s metaphorical blackness equates Othello’s literal blackness, furthering the reading that Desdemona is a positive entity in the tragedy-ridden world of *Othello*. Here, Bovilsky implicates Iago. Bovilsky discusses what cutting the interaction between Desdemona and Iago does to live productions and the overall portrayal of Desdemona. She asserts:

When productions of *Othello* eliminate the bawdy dialogue between Iago and Desdemona, for example, they suppress Desdemona’s agency as a sexual subject and thereby also suppress important elements of the play’s racial logic, which simultaneously insists on

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<sup>11</sup> One example of this is in the 2019 Stratford Shakespeare Festival production. Upon Iago responding “She never yet was foolish that was fair,/For even her folly helped her to an heir” (II.I.131-32), she replies “Oh most lame and impotent conclusion” (Williams) rather than her later line regarding alehouses, which alters the scene just enough to help the audience overlook the banter.

Desdemona's flawless 'fairness' and disturbing 'blackness.' For, as Iago's couplet on blackness and wit implies in reverse, Desdemona's whiteness is instrumental in producing the negative connotations of Othello's blackness. At the same time, however, Desdemona's agency, in defiance of her father's and husband's expectations, leads directly to her progressive and virulent racialization in the play. (Bovilsky 39)

Bovilsky begins the discussion of Desdemona's racialization in a way that makes Desdemona "black" as well. This scene, while soiling Desdemona's reputation as hero and savior, acts more as a reinforcement of Desdemona's casual approach to racism.

Iago: If she be fair and wise, fairness and wit,  
The one's for use, the other useth it.

Desdemona: Well praised! How if she be black and witty?

Iago: If she be black and thereto have a wit,  
She'll find a white that shall her blackness fit.

Desdemona: Worse and worse.

Emelia: How if fair and foolish?

Iago: She never yet was foolish that was fair,  
For even her folly helped her to an heir.

Desdemona: These are old fond paradoxes, to make fools laugh  
i'th'alehouse. (II.I.132-141)

Desdemona does something here that can be considered as problematic for the audience that views her as the embodiment of purity and innocence. She continues to engage in a conversation with Iago, who clearly identifies himself as a person who views fairness as superior and blackness as inferior, without choosing to point out that what he is saying is harmful to an entire group of people. Her only refute of this is telling the audience that these are jokes for the bar, and she does not discuss the issue with the conversation beyond this.

The issue of this scene lies much deeper, however, as Desdemona notes that these jokes are stemming from a place lying in an unrecognizable place within her, yet she does nothing to start the process of correcting that primitive section of the brain. She says outright that this

banter should be shared among drunken fools rather than the three of them. Here, Desdemona makes a slight nod to the place from where racism and anti-blackness stems by implying that the racism present in this scene goes beyond the conscious human and is rooted much more deeply in the consistently saturated in anti-blackness part of the brain. Richard Dyer mentions this in his book when he says, “I don’t believe that such [stereotypical] thoughts are a ‘real me’ lurking behind a façade of anti-racism. I did not invent racist thought, it is part of the cultural non-consciousness that we all inhabit. One must take responsibility for it, but that is not the same as being responsible, that is, to blame for it” (Dyer 7). Dyer implicates himself in this passage as someone who has done wrong, noting that as a white body in a white-dominated culture he has been almost conditioned to make quick judgements about bodies that have been deemed “other.” What is noteworthy in this, however, is that he mentions the necessity to take responsibility for those snap-judgements regardless of the cause; this is something that Desdemona is not seen doing in Act II, Scene I. Instead, she greets Othello and goes about her day as if the casual racism exchanged between herself, Iago, and Emilia never occurred. Which, to her, it may as well not have. The anti-black banter of this scene takes place fully between three characters who are not under the influence of a drug. Rather, they are under the influence of their continued submersion in a society fully supportive of the systemic oppression of non-white bodies. In Act I, Scene III, Desdemona was clear that she loves Othello for his mind, and here she makes it clear that this is all she will ever be able to love of him. Her language, along with the language of Iago, has equated fairness with superiority and blackness with inferiority. These characters carry those connotations with them, whether consciously (as is the case with Iago) or suppressed deep within them (like Desdemona).

While Desdemona has made a choice to only make a slight adjustment in the course of the conversation, she has furthered the problematics in her approach to race by choosing to stand up for women as a whole rather than the black women condemned in their conversation. Feminism has had many waves, but a similarity between each wave is the popular belief that speaking up for women means you are speaking up for all women from all backgrounds equally. Ruth Frankenberg acknowledges that feminism has struggled due to this choice to engage in feminist

matters that benefit only the white bodies of the movement. Feminism does not inherently mean anti-racist, and Desdemona's language in Act II, Scene I emphasizes this. Desdemona has made it clear to the audience that she is engaging in conversation with Iago to keep her mind off Othello's wellbeing when she suddenly makes a statement that attempts to negate the casual racism of the conversation up to this point. While before she makes comments regarding a woman's intelligence and the relationship it holds to skin tone, she flips the conversation on its head by telling Iago (much later) that he looks upon "the worst" women with the worst qualities by giving them "the best" praise in the conversation, continuing to leave the racial portion of the discussion behind her (II.I.146). She makes this comment, grouping all women together while ignoring the racial tensions of the conversation to this point. Desdemona's choice to do this aligns with the consistent idea in feminist thinking that because she is advocating for women in this moment she is advocating for all women regardless of phenology. Through this thinking, this negates her need to discuss race because she is addressing gender (Frankenberg 4). Desdemona's status as a white woman is continuing to act as erasure of blackness in this scene by focusing on Iago's interpretation of women in general while ignoring the anti-black sentiments of the conversation.

While Desdemona's engrained, casual approach to racism is present in the two scenes discussed prior to this, it is most easily identified by audience members in Desdemona's death scene. Throughout Othello's unraveling, Desdemona becomes continually more fearful of her husband despite her knowledge that she is innocent. Through all of this fear, Desdemona continues to do those things that are considered to be wifely duties; she does what Othello asks even when she suspects it means her demise and she is never heard speaking poorly of him directly. For these reasons it is difficult to identify Desdemona as a part of the embodied systemic oppression portrayed by her character. In Act V, Scene II, Desdemona is bargaining for her life with Othello. While doing this, she says, "And yet I fear you, for you're fatal then / When your eyes roll so. Why I should fear I know not, / Since guiltiness I know not, but yet I feel I fear" (V.II.39-41). Desdemona's choice of words here are a nod back to Act I, Scene III. There, she never admits to those present that she loves Othello for his appearance, and here she admits that she is fearful of Othello

because of his appearance. The anti-blackness that has seeped into her through societal power structures has begun to expose itself to Othello.

Desdemona's fear of Othello and his appearance in this scene indicates that she truly has been affected by the systemic oppression of racialized bodies consistently portrayed for the audience. In Act I, Scene III, Brabantio has asked Desdemona to confirm that she loves Othello, but while she is able to do so, she never admits to loving him for his appearance. One of the reasons Desdemona is unable to proclaim her love of Othello's body as she does his mind is due to the fear of black bodies engrained in early modern citizens through politics and popular culture. In the early modern period, Moors are written as caricatures of the anxieties that are cast onto the black bodies they are portraying (Bartels), and Othello is no exception. In *Turning Turk in "Othello:" The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor*, Daniel Vitkus informs readers that Othello "draws on early modern anxieties about Ottoman aggression and links them to a larger network of moral, sexual, and religious uncertainty which touched English Protestants directly" (Vitkus 146). This fear is reflected on the stage during the Stratford Shakespeare Festival production of *Othello*. Amelia Sargisson, the actress playing Desdemona, seems visibly fearful while doing what she can to keep her white body away from Othello's black body; doing this demonstrates the engrained fear Desdemona has of Othello. During the early modern period, this would look like the fears of the early modern audience members reflected back to them through Desdemona's fear of Othello's blackness.

Through Desdemona's fear of Othello and her actual death, the audience witness the one way Othello works as erasure of himself. In his book, Richard Dyer writes a chapter discussing death and the white body. In it, Dyer asserts, "The theme of whiteness and death takes many forms. Whites often seem to have a special relation with death, to yearn for it but also to bring it to others...if the white association with death is the logical outcome of the way in which whites have had power, then perhaps recognition of our deathliness may be the one thing that will make us relinquish it" (Dyer 208). This idea that whiteness holds its power over othered bodies because of the relationship the white body has with death holds true in this scene through the use of Desdemona as a prop after her death. It is through Sargisson's final costume in Act V, Scene II – a tight



white tank top and small white shorts – that the audience can see the costume choices coming to a deadly point. The splashes of white in her costumes here and there throughout the contemporary adaptation have worked to keep the audience attuned to her race, and in the end, she is completely washed out: white skin, blonde hair, white clothes. She has not a single nail painted, no jewelry, socks, or shoes; she is just whiteness on white sheets. The words Othello speaks just before murdering her ring true of her appearance. She looks just like the “monumental alabaster” Othello wishes to preserve about her by not piercing her skin (V.XII.5). This attention to the detail of Desdemona’s whiteness can be looked at both literally and figuratively. Literally she is the epidermal white contrasting the epidermal black of Othello. Figuratively, as per Williams’s goals for the production, her whiteness is associated with goodness and purity while his blackness signals evil and corruption. The costumes reflect the essence of character the audience is encouraged to see. The audience can visualize Desdemona’s whiteness working as erasure of Othello by privileging the moral superiority of her white victimhood over his black aggression.

In the 2019 production of *Othello* at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival, Desdemona’s whiteness is an ever-looming presence on the stage. Although the director’s note indicates that Desdemona should be viewed as a positive entity, her whiteness still works as erasure of Othello’s blackness. Williams’s note reads like a love letter to Desdemona, enticing images for the reader of goodness, hope, truth, and light through his language of her. The title of his note, “Their World is Our World,” emphasizes that he wants his audience to understand that *Othello* is just as relevant today as it was in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Williams’s world shows the audience that Desdemona’s role holds the most influence in *Othello*, and if we all were just a little more like her our world would be a much better place. Instead, this production plays on her whiteness to expose the mirror images of a stagnant society – the society in the off-kilter world produced on the stage and the world of the 2019 audience members. Amelia Sargisson successfully depicts Desdemona the way Williams indicates he wants her to be played; however, the message received differs from that which was intended.

Williams’s assertion that Desdemona is a source of light regarding the racial politics of *Othello* is not unfounded. For an early modern play,

*Othello* does seem to break the mold a bit by employing a character with colorblind tendencies. The innovation ends there, however, as Desdemona has been stuck in this moment of colorblindness that never evolves to anything more. But this is to be expected, as “whiteness changes over time and space and is in no way a transhistorical essence...it is a complexly constructed product of local, regional, national, and global relations, past and present” (Frankenberg 236). Because of this, it is expected that Desdemona’s approach to Othello’s blackness was innovative and groundbreaking and empathy-evoking to those watching this play in the early modern era, but in 2019 we should be able to identify the problematics of her whiteness and the way it works for the anti-black narrative through the erasure of Othello’s racial identity. For many this is not the case. Critics and directors alike have chosen to look at Desdemona as positive entity in *Othello* and see her as if she is the only truly hopeful character on stage. Through her language and the costume choices of the Desdemona in the 2019 Stratford Shakespeare Festival, however, it can be seen that her whiteness has been used to completely villainize the blackness of Othello.

The focus on Desdemona’s light is made evident by the on-stage choices of the actors and their costumes, however, it is the words of director Nigel Shawn Williams’s Director’s Note that created the careful observance required for the intended analysis of the play. In this production of *Othello*, the audience has been primed to see that Desdemona is what their world needs, but it is also made applicable to our own world through the modern costumes and reactions of the actors. Williams’s statement asks for more allowance for those like Desdemona to thrive in the world we live in today. The production’s focus on her whiteness is not saying that white people are the ones who will save the world from other white monsters (like Iago). Rather, it is acting as a call-to-action for white people to accept those who do not look like them or share their ancestral past and to love them while simultaneously disregarding those things that make them “othered” in the first place. It communicates that it is okay to remain in the “colorblind phase;” as long as it dispels blatant racism, anti-blackness can be dealt with as it comes.

This production of *Othello* at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival uses Desdemona’s whiteness as way to demonstrate the stagnation of

today's white-dominant society of intolerance, avoidance, and unwillingness to accept those that have been deemed "other." The costume and acting choices in combination with the words of the director work together to create a desire for action from the targeted white audience to be more like Desdemona. Nigel Shawn Williams reached his goal, but the call for people to accept and adopt the mentality of Desdemona in today's world is problematic; her choices have worked to erase Othello's racial identity and negate other people of color through her testimony before the Senate, banter with Iago on Cyprus, and assumption regarding the responsibility of her own death. While that colorblind approach would have been exciting and welcomed with open arms in the past, today we should approach these mentalities with a more critical attitude. They work to further oppress an already systemically oppressed population of non-white bodies, and this production works starts a conversation that works toward the reproduction of that oppression.

The erasure of blackness by whiteness is not contained to isolated incidents in *Othello* or texts written on whiteness studies; it extends beyond that to the education of individuals in the contemporary world. The *No Fear Shakespeare* edition of *Othello* has interpreted the back-and-forth banter between Desdemona, Iago, and Emilia in Act II, Scene I in a different way than the critics have. In this edition, the jokes shared between the three characters create a code – fair is beauty and black is ugly. According to both the notes in the margins of the Norton anthology and the Oxford English Dictionary this is not the intended meaning of these lines. The entry for "black" in the OED literally says, "having black hair or eyes; dark-complexioned" and notes this exact scene below it (OED Online). Usually these interpretations of the Shakespeare plays try to make the early modern language more accessible for young readers. Why, then, in 2019, does the *No Fear Shakespeare* version of *Othello* read by today's children equate blackness with ugliness? The answer is the continued belief that whiteness is universal and because of this it is easy to continue the cyclic reproduction of an anti-black society through the education of the youth. This can continue to be accomplished through small measures such as the banning of books discussing race and the misinterpretation of the language in books, that are required for the education of their high schoolers. The potential for a more nuanced and full identification with

Othello is erased not just through Desdemona's whiteness, but also in our contemporary glosses, productions, and criticisms.

Directors such as Nigel Shawn Williams are on the right track to recovery by discussing the applicability of plays like William Shakespeare's *Othello* to the contemporary world – especially when considering the continuation of the systematic oppression of racialized bodies – even if they do so by promoting colorblind actions to their audience members. It is a step away from the complete vilification of Othello's character and toward a narrative that does not promote anti-blackness. However, more directors need to recognize the problematics of characters such as Desdemona who use their whiteness, even if unknowingly, to negate the lives of the characters of color. Also, more critics can contribute to this by continuing to discuss the problematics of white characters and their approach to race in the works in which they are depicted. For example, the conversation surrounding Desdemona might be furthered by potentially examining the other scenes between her and Othello more closely. When these institutions (academia and theater) begin to work together to expose the problematics of the deeply rooted concept of anti-blackness and consequent erasure of black subjectivity they will be able to truly work against the systematic oppression contributing to the racial tensions in 2020..

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