

AMERICA PRODUCES *OTHELLO*: A REPRESENTATION OF
CONTEMPORARY RACIAL CONDITIONS IN THE US

by

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For centuries, literary critics and theater directors alike have appreciated William Shakespeare's play, *Othello*, for its ability to confront racist notions. This play significantly challenged the racist beliefs of Shakespeare's seventeenth century audience when it was first produced, and following the original production of *Othello*, directors continue to use this work to powerfully effect contemporary audiences. Directors within the United States are among those who produce this play in order to address racism within their own society. Yet, due to the transformation that the nature of racism has undergone between early seventeenth century England and contemporary America, these productions are significantly altered in order to clearly address the current racist conditions in the US. In examining these contemporary productions of Shakespeare's *Othello* that have been notably fashioned for and/or clearly influenced by America's contemporary racial concerns, we not only appreciate the new meaning these productions bring to Shakespeare's original text but recognize the evidence they reveal regarding the current racial conditions of contemporary America.

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INTRODUCTION

I'd be surprised if, thanks to the farsightedness of the Theatre Guild and the magnificent performance of Paul Robeson in the title role, we fortunate New York playgoers were not seeing the real "Othello," the Moor of Venice William Shakespeare actually had in mind, for the first time. Certainly, in all my nights of attendance on the world of make-believe, there has been nothing to equal it.

Such is the review Robert Garland offered in the *New York Journal-American* on October 20, 1943, the morning following the opening night of Paul Robeson's historical performance of Shakespeare's play *Othello*. The event marked the first time a black actor was cast to play this title role on the American stage, and as articles in nearly every New York paper the following day testify, this production did not go unrecognized. As Burton Rascoe of the *New York World-Telegram* voiced and many others echoed, "the Theatre Guild Production of this Shakespearean production . . . is one of the most memorable events in the history of the theater."

It was not only an event that took place within the closed doors of the theater, but rather, each night as the production ended, the significance of Paul Robeson's performance poured out into the streets of New York along with the audience. For, some felt that bringing professional black actors to the American stage was long overdue. Thirteen years prior, in 1930, this same actor had played Othello on the English stage, yet America and its racial prejudice was not ready to receive Paul Robeson at that time. Thus, in addition to signifying developments on America's stage, Robeson's appearance indicated the outset of changes within the minds of the American society. A black actor not only took the stage, but took center stage, and he did it in a manner that "[brought] dignity, warmth and terror to a part which has eluded many great actors" (Howard Barnes *New York Herald Tribune*). Robeson's performance broke records in the box offices,

exceeding all previous sale records for Shakespeare productions in the United States. Such popularity was not simply due to common theatergoers' increased attendance, but rather each night seated next to those with season tickets were New York's cab drivers and soldiers home from the war (Hankey 101). As the play's director, Margaret Webster, recognized, this production was "a declaration, and its success an event in which the performance itself was of less importance than the public event" (qtd. In Hankey 101)¹.

Coupled with this "declaration," which affirmed a place for black actors on the American stage, Shakespeare's play was seen newly. One can only imagine what it meant to the audience in 1943 as they no longer observed a white man "playing black" in the role of Othello but for the first time witnessed a black man perform this role. What was the effect when the white actors on stage referred to an actual black man as a "thicklip," a "sooty bosom" or a "black ram"? Further, how did this production have a unique impact on those white soldiers in the audience who had recently returned from the war in which they battled "with" black American soldiers yet physically remained segregated from them? The clear injustice by which Othello is persecuted for his race yet favored for his military skill as a general too closely parallels the treatment of black American males at that time who were denied equal rights at home yet were expected to battle as equals in the war. The additional irony that Robeson, while on stage, was the star of this renowned production yet, while on tour, was the only cast member denied lodging by several hotels is remarkable. Considering both the war and racial tension of the time, one recognizes the immediacy Robeson's performance brought to Shakespeare's play. The struggles of this leading role created over three centuries ago

¹ See Appendix A

became much more real and significant. It was this immediacy that inspired Garland to believe that in 1943 America was “seeing the real ‘Othello,’ the Moor of Venice William Shakespeare actually had in mind, for the first time.”

Although Garland believed that this 1943 production landed on the truth of Shakespeare, we must recognize that Shakespeare’s genius rests in the very idea that his intentions are never certain. Rather, each play lends itself to multiple meanings, always uprooting itself from one fixed understanding. This aspect of Shakespeare’s work is the force that has moved him through the centuries and brings him to our contemporary stage. Shakespeare did not create works intended to simply inform his time, but rather as John Elsom describes, “Shakespeare left behind a rich wardrobe of clothes, props and ideas which we [can] wear according to our moods and necessities” (3). Following Shakespeare’s era, those significant productions of his plays do not simply use this wardrobe to replay 16th and 17th century Shakespeare; rather they perform Shakespeare, proposing to speak through his plays in order to inform, stir, and reflect upon the contemporary society out of which these productions are born.

Upon establishing the distinct meaning that Shakespeare’s plays achieve due to the unique age and culture in which they are performed, this study now moves to contemporary society in the US and returns to consider specifically Shakespeare’s play *Othello*. As earlier noted, due to the state of race relations in the US in 1943, Robeson’s performance of *Othello* fittingly interpreted the play as a work that principally sets forth questions of racism. Director Margaret Webster and this production’s cast utilized Shakespeare to address and confront the American public with the racism that was so evident in their society. Although the state of race relations did not transform overnight,

the production made a memorable dent in the hard-set heads of white America and contributed to the black American esteem that would later fuel the Civil Rights movement.

Over a half-century past the historical Robeson performance of *Othello*, contemporary America stands on notably different racial ground. Due to the accomplishments begun by the Civil Rights movement, Americans consider the prominent racism of the 1940's a thing of the past. No longer would the opening of a play starring a black actor constitute a national event, nor would contemporary American audiences react with an "audible gasp" (Hankey 103) at the sight of a black man kissing a white woman as Robeson's audience did in 1943. It is in light of this apparently transformed racial atmosphere that the question of this thesis resides: considering Shakespeare's *Othello*, which is historically understood as a work that displays and explores ideas of racism, this thesis aims to examine how our contemporary American culture uniquely handles and speaks through this play. Recognizing the interpretation and achievements of Robeson's production in 1943, this thesis is asking how contemporary America produces *Othello* for its age and culture, and more significantly, how these productions in their very attempt to speak *to* our American society reveal notions much more profound *about* our society.

RACISM AND THE MEANING OF *BLACK* IN SHAKESPEARE'S ORIGINAL TEXT

In order to appreciate the manner in which our contemporary American society, as well as Robeson's 1940 society, uniquely treats and speaks through the racial context that *Othello* offers, it is necessary to first recognize the effect and meaning this play achieved when it was originally produced for and by Shakespeare's 17th century culture. As earlier discussed, Robeson and Webster utilized Shakespeare's play to challenge both the complacent opinions about, and treatment of, black Americans that America's 1940 white society maintained. Such use of Shakespeare's play resembles the original function of *Othello* as it was first performed in the Jacobean age. Similar to Robeson and Webster three and a half centuries later, through the context of *Othello* Shakespeare shook into question the firmly established meaning of *black* and *white* within his society. Robeson and Webster challenged these meanings which, as Philip Mason describes, white America upheld due to its desire to maintain "political and economic" privilege in the US. Mason continues by explaining that Shakespeare was presenting a distinct challenge to the meaning of *black* and *white* in the early 17th century. In Shakespeare's age, such meaning was not upheld by the whites' desire for economic and power privileges; rather, the meaning of *black* and *white* in the Jacobean age was maintained by whites due to "psychological and cultural" beliefs (122).

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) explains that in 17th century England, coupled with indicating "extremely dark skin," the word *black* also meant, "having dark or deadly purposes, malignant; pertaining to or involving death, deadly; baneful, disastrous, sinister." The definition continues to include, "foul, iniquitous, atrocious, horribly wicked." The term *black man*, in addition to indicating "a man having black or

very dark skin,” also referred to “an evil spirit; . . . the evil one, the devil; [or] a spirit or bogey invoked in order to terrify children.” In contrast to these meanings stood the word *white*, which in addition to referring to “whiteness or fairness of complexion,” the *OED* also describes was often figuratively used for, “a symbol of purity, goodness, truth, joy, etc.”

Shakespearean critic, G. K. Hunter, explains that this negative meaning of *black*, which can be traced back to ancient Greece and Rome, was incorporated into Christian theology and continued to thrive in Shakespeare’s day (33-34). Through both literature and other art forms, the link between blackness and sin, malignity, and wickedness was continually affirmed for those in 16th and 17th century English society. Such statements as Reginald Scott’s in *The Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584), in which he asserts, “A damned soule may and doth take the shape of a blacke moore” (qtd. in Hunter 34), would neither seem uncommon nor unreasonable in Shakespeare’s day. If Shakespeare’s society was not reading such negative definitions of black, they were being visually instructed concerning the meaning of black by their cathedrals and popular art. The tradition of indicating evil men in pictures by giving them black faces remained strong in this age, and as Hunter describes, “This appears especially in works showing the tormentors of Christ, in scenes of the Flagellation and the Mocking, though the tormentors of the other saints are liable to have the same external characteristics used to show their evil natures” (36).² No clearer picture than the white-faced, sinless Christ tortured and killed by black-faced men could have set the pure meaning of white against the wicked understanding of black in this era. This foul and common view of black in Shakespeare’s day was most pointedly summarized by 17th century poet and satirist

Samuel Butler's pronouncement: "Some with the devil himself in league grow / By's representative, a Negro" (qtd. in Hunter 35).

It is with this understanding of blackness, as the external manifestation of internal sin, malignity, baseness, and union with the devil, that Shakespeare's audience entered the Globe Theatre; and it was this very notion that Shakespeare's *Othello* would disturb. In the opening scene, as Roderigo notes Othello's "thick-lips" (I. i. 70) and Iago refers to him as "an old black ram" (I. i. 96) and "devil" (I. i. 99), the black skin of the yet to be seen Moor of Venice is not only confirmed but, as it would follow, his black or evil nature seems inarguably established as well. The Jacobean audience awaited the entrance of the Moor, whom they trusted would prove malignant, deadly, disastrous, and wicked. Yet, as Othello first appears on stage and begins to speak, it becomes clear that Shakespeare's black Moor does not fit the traditional description. Shakespeare puts Othello in opposition to everything his 17th century audience expects of him, thus simultaneously bringing into question this society's understanding of black.

According to Jacobean understanding, Othello, because of the blackness of his outer skin, inevitably should demonstrate the corresponding black nature of his inner soul: it is only moments into his first scene that Othello disrupts the traditional unfolding of a black character. Rather than demonstrating the "fatal power of attracting loose women," which was attributed to black Moors (Hankey 14), this Moor attests to an honest love for his wife, Desdemona: "For Know, Iago, / But that I love the gentle Desdemona" (I. ii. 26-27). Only a few lines following, he shows his honorable disposition when, in reaction to Iago's advice to flee at the coming of the angered

² See Appendix B

Brabantio, Othello remains and asserts a confidence in his guiltless nature: “My parts, my title, and my perfect soul / Shall manifest me rightly” (I. ii. 35-36).

Not only does Othello bear evidence of his honorable nature, but the other characters further testify to the unexpected, noble qualities of this black Moor. The audience is informed that this black man is not in league with the devil, but rather Othello is a Christian. Even more, Hunter points out that due to his position as the commanding general of the Venetian forces, “[he] is the leader of Christendom in the last and highest sense in which Christendom existed as a viable entity, crusading against the ‘black pagens’” (45). Desdemona, upon describing her love for the Moor, indicates the discrepancy she found between the blackness of her husband’s skin and the pure nature of his soul: “I saw Othello’s visage in his mind, / And to his honors and his valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate” (I. iii. 274-76). Desdemona witnesses in Othello a righteous inner quality and finds this inner purity overshadows his outward blackness. The Duke most pointedly throws into question whether the 17th century understanding of *black* and *white* is truly fixed when he notes, “If virtue no delighted beauty lack, / Your son-in-law is far more fair than black” (I. iii. 314-15). Within this line, the Duke both doubts the “blackness” of Othello as well as the notion that *black* and *white* can be assigned any absolute meaning.

Shakespeare further challenges the complacent understanding his audience accepted concerning the meaning of black and white when, in addition to exposing the “fairness” of the black Othello, he prompts the “fair” Iago to display the evil practices the audience expected of Othello and, much like the devil himself, cause the “blackening” of fair souls in this play. Despite his white skin, Iago discloses his self-serving inner nature

when he states early in the play, “ I will follow him to serve my turn upon him” (I. i. 45). He further exposes the malice and deception that harbors beneath his white exterior as he describes:

not I for love or duty, / But seeming so, for my peculiar end; / For when my outward action doth demonstrate / The native act and figure of my heart / In compliment extern, 'tis not long after / But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve / For daws to peck at. I am not what I am. (I. i. 63-69)

In addition to the misleading nature of Othello's black exterior in this play, Iago reveals that his outward, white appearance will prove deceptive as well. This white man not only demonstrates the evil nature to contrive his destructive plot, but he further displays the wicked determination to realize his ambitions when he declares, “I have't! It is engend' red! Hell and night / Must bring the monstrous birth to the world's light” (I. ii. 421-22). As the play unfolds, the audience witnesses as Iago's base nature proves capable to, “Turn [Desdemona's] virtue into pitch” (II. iii. 362) as well as evoke “black vengeance [to arise] from the hollow hell” (III. iii. 500) in the once fair Othello. A white Iago, not the assumed black Moor, is responsible for birthing sin and death within this Venetian state.

Through presenting the fair nature of a black man's soul and the black condition of a white man's soul, Shakespeare's *Othello* called into question the validity of the accepted meaning of black and white within this time. In this play a “damned soule” did not “take the shape of a blacke moore” as Reginald Scott and others believed in the Jacobean age, rather it took the unexpected shape of a civilized, white soldier. Shakespeare pulled on the unchallenged link between exterior appearance and interior reality and showed it easily broken. This understanding of black as the moral and religious sign of sin and evil that had somehow maintained vitality from ancient Greece

and Rome all the way into Shakespeare's day was discredited by the figure of Othello. Shakespeare's audience was asked to question the accuracy of their understanding of black that contemporary literature and art affirmed for them each day of their lives.

FROM EARLY 17TH CENTURY ENGLAND TO LATE 20TH CENTURY AMERICA: *OTHELLO* IN THE CONTEMPORARY US

Through situating *Othello* in the racial atmosphere in which it was first written and performed, we are able to recognize the original meaning and effect of Shakespeare's play. The physical blackness of Othello embodying his spiritual purity confronted Shakespeare's audience with their false understanding of the meaning of black. Shakespeare's honorable Moor disrupts much of the moral and religious prejudice that 16th and 17th century English society maintained concerning those of the black race. As earlier mentioned, this challenge that *Othello* presents regarding prejudice and the meaning of black and white was once again, nearly four centuries later, employed by Paul Robeson and Margaret Webster to significantly address the racial conditions in the United States in 1940. Yet, due to the unique racial atmosphere in the age and culture of the US in the 1940's, the meaning of this production of *Othello* became distinct and new. In 17th century England, few people had continuous if any contact with black people and, thus, people with black skin continued to be seen as foreigners. In contrast, due to centuries of slave trade, the US in 1940 had a significant population of black Americans. Further, prejudice against black Americans in the 1940's was not the result of moral or religious beliefs as it was in Shakespeare's day; rather racial prejudice in this culture was fueled by the sense of economic and power threat that a growing black population posed for whites. The notion that blacks were inherently evil had been done away with yet, as Philip Mason explains, "the idea of equality [seemed] a threat to the . . . privileged races in the world," or the whites in America, and thus there existed "a determination by the top people to insist on difference" (26, 32). As false ideology regarding the evil nature of

blacks was torn down, segregated institutions were built up, with the desire to maintain the dominant and privileged position white society in the US was accustomed to. Thus, Robeson's performance of Othello confronted a distinctly transformed state of racism.

Years before playing the role, Robeson revealed to his wife that if he ever had the chance to play Othello, he was determined to "bring to the stage the nobility, sympathy, and understanding Shakespeare put into the play" (qtd. in Kaul 17). His purpose in displaying the nobility of this black Moor was not to demonstrate that it is possible for a black man to contain a fair soul per se but, much more pertinent, to proclaim the dignity, talent and, therefore, right of black people to be considered and treated as equals within American society. As the first black man to perform the role, Robeson took on the part of Othello not as an individual actor but as a representative of his entire race (Kaul 17), and as this representative he was widely celebrated. Robeson's stage manager recalls, "every where we went he was adored . . . every night long lines of people waited . . . to speak to him—black and white" (qtd. in Hankey 102). Theater critics as well echoed such applause as those voiced by Howard Barnes: "Robeson's color as much as his fine acting skill . . . brings a rather tricky melodrama into sharp and memorable focus. Lines which meant nothing when a white man played the part . . . loom impressively" (qtd. in Kaul 16). Yet, despite white America's appreciation for this black man's talent, America continued, through such acts as denying Robeson stay at several hotels while on tour, to segregate him and all other black Americans from attaining equal rights. The event of this production clearly exposed the discrepancy of white America's treatment of black citizens. By bringing the first black actor to the professional American stage during a time of strong segregation and racism, Robeson and Webster's production of *Othello*

shook up the racial notions of their time in a distinct yet equally as powerful manner as Shakespeare first achieved. It was, as Burton Roscoe reported the morning following the play's opening, "one of the most memorable events in the history of the theater" as well as a clearly historical event in the history of race relations in the US.

The institutionalized and visibly apparent racism that existed in both Shakespeare's era as well as in the age of the 1940's in the US allowed both the original production of *Othello* and Robeson's production to forcefully confront and address the racial conditions of these two societies. Yet, how is it, or is it at all, possible for contemporary America to produce *Othello* with such immediate significance? Does this play today maintain the vital force it demonstrated in early 17th century England and 1940 America, and can it speak as directly to our contemporary racial conditions as it historically has? Clearly the notion that black skin is the external sign for internal wickedness is not the promoted nor socially accepted belief. Contemporary America neither upholds the inhumane practice of chattel slavery, nor does it maintain segregated institutions which, following the era of slavery, continued to oppress black people and define them as the inferior race of America. Such obvious forms of racism are not a part of this contemporary culture. Further, changes enacted by the Civil Rights movement and programs such as Affirmative Action propose to promote the equal success of black Americans in the contemporary US. Yet, any realistic American citizen realizes that despite such significant changes, racism has not been erased from our society. Racism as well as questions concerning race relations continue to be a part of American life, yet these issues have taken on much more discrete and complex forms.

As earlier stated, considering this unique racial atmosphere in contemporary America, this thesis aims to realize how our society produces Shakespeare's play *Othello* with the purpose of directly speaking to the current racial conditions of our contemporary US culture. Where Robeson and Webster significantly cast a black man, rather than a white man in black-face, to play Othello, what choices do contemporary productions make in order to uniquely affect and speak to its audience? In addition, how do these choices not only bring new meaning to Shakespeare's play, but in turn reveal something just as profound about the society that has made these distinct production decisions? Such are the questions that have inspired this investigation of contemporary productions of Shakespeare's *Othello* in the US.

Of all the productions of *Othello* in the US from 1990 to present, two significant productions prove relevant to this study; director Hal Scott's production which was first produced for the Levin Theater Company at Rutgers University in 1990, and later produced at the Folger Shakespeare Theater in 1991 and at the Great Lakes Theater Festival in 1993, and director Jude Kelly and Patrick Stewart's production, which was presented by the Shakespeare Theatre at the Lansburgh Theatre in Washington DC from November 1997 to January 1998. Unlike the majority of the productions of this play within the past ten years, which made few if any alterations to Shakespeare's original play, these two productions have been notably fashioned for and clearly influenced by contemporary American society. Both production concepts³ demonstrate purposeful choices regarding casting, setting, and interpretive intent that aim to communicate not

³ I must note that due to my inability to attend or acquire recordings of these productions, I will be discussing these two plays primarily as production concepts; as opposed to focusing on what exactly took place on stage, I will be discussing the idea of these concepts and the effect they have on Shakespeare's original text.

with Shakespeare's day but with our own. Considering the distinct casting, setting, and interpretive elements of these two production concepts, this study relates these concepts back to the text of the play in order to examine how these production choices lend new meaning to Shakespeare's work and/or introduce unique problems. Through the close study of these two production concepts and the influence they have on Shakespeare's play, this study will come to recognize the manner in which the intentions of Hal Scott and Jude Kelly/Patrick Stewart's production concepts reflect the concerns, values, and current racial condition of contemporary American society.

HAL SCOTT'S PRODUCTION CONCEPT

Director Hal Scott's innovative production concept for *Othello* first appeared on stage in 1990 at Rutgers's University. In this production, Scott chose to cast Andre Braugher, a black actor, to play the villainous, traditionally white, Iago. Braugher played this role opposite Avery Brooks as Othello, thus creating a production in which the two central figures are both black. Scott's distinct casting decision was based on his own trouble with the traditional casting when he played Othello years earlier in 1968. He notes, "I played it, but I had trouble believing it. I would think, 'Why would this black man trust this white man?'" (qtd. in Maufort 87). According to Scott, a much more believable production presents an Othello who entrusts his fate to a fellow black man, rather than dubiously to a white man. In addition to the nontraditional casting of Iago, Scott's production presents Emilia, Iago's wife, nontraditionally as a black woman as well.⁴ In the program for the 1993 production at the Great Lakes Theater Festival, Scott explains his reasoning in making these alterations to Shakespeare's play: "If all three [Iago, Emilia, and Othello] are from one culture, it makes the extreme closeness of their intrapersonal relationships far more credible." Overall, the play achieves what Scott calls an "Afrocentric," as opposed to a Eurocentric, presentation of Shakespeare's original play. Considering that this production concept was again produced on two later occasions following its initial 1990 run, it is clear that such an Afrocentric view of Shakespeare's work has been appreciated by contemporary American audiences.

⁴ My use of the word "nontraditional" casting should be noted as distinct from "colorblind" casting. As Johnson-Haddad explains the significance of this distinction, "nontraditional casting involves casting an actor of a race or sex not usually associated with a given role in order to make a point about the role and/or to shed new light upon the play. In colorblind or genderblind casting . . . the director is not attempting to

The popularity of Scott's production concept is not difficult to explain, for the intriguing sight of this nontraditional casting in and of itself would draw many theatergoers familiar with *Othello*.⁵ As this production concept takes effect on Shakespeare's original text, we realize the profound influence it achieves upon all aspects of the play. Altering the traditional roles of Iago and Emilia and casting them with black actors adds, in addition to the white community that has always existed in this play, a small yet profoundly significant representation of a black community as well. One finds that Scott's production concept, thus, enables the exploration of not only relations between black and white in this play but between members within the black race. This production concept demonstrates the many layers that make up what contemporary society deems "race relations," and as a result, Scott reveals that such relations are much more rich and complex than typically recognized. Further, this concept moves the play towards blending two dichotomies, black and white and men and women, which are kept distinct in traditional productions: Scott's concept often causes race and gender relations to be explored simultaneously. Through a close study of Scott's production concept and the manner in which it transforms Shakespeare's text, we will recognize how this concept renders these dichotomies more complex, presents new avenues to discuss them, and suggests new means by which racial conflicts might somehow be resolved.

As before suggested, one might simply come to see the performance of Scott's production concept simply due to its innovative visual effect. For *Othello*, because of the contrasting blackness of his skin, has always powerfully stood out in Shakespeare's play as the "other" or "outsider" within the white Venetian society. Yet, with a black Iago and

make a point about the role of the play. In other words, we are meant to notice and reflect upon a nontraditional casting choice" (476).

Emilia on stage in this production concept, Othello is no longer seen as this solitary figure (Johnson-Haddad 476). This additional representation of the black race is particularly significant in Act I, Scene ii when Othello, due to his black skin, is accused of having used wicked means to win the white Desdemona's hand in marriage. Brabantio, who has always displayed a fondness for Othello, now heaps racial insults upon him in disgust at the thought of Othello's marriage to his daughter. Brabantio attaches to Othello the stereotypical notion that black men possess the fatal power to attract women when he cries: "O thou foul thief, where hast thou stowed my daughter? Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her!" (I. ii. 76-78). He further reveals his true repulsion concerning Othello's race as he asserts his daughter would never in her good sense, "Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as thou—to fear, not to delight" (I. ii. 84-86). As Iago stands in this scene as an additional black figure, these harsh racist remarks become all the more directed not at Othello as an individual but at the black race as a whole that both he and Iago represent. Sharing Othello's race inevitably causes Iago to experience the wounds of Brabantio's racial attack as well. As a result, this scene suggests a bond between Iago and Othello as they suffer together as victims of racism.

Not only does Scott's distinct casting of *Othello* result in a heightened sense of racial attack on the black race as a whole rather than on Othello as an individual, but this production concept also offers moments in which the white race for the first time is seen as the "outsider." In those scenes in which Desdemona is alone with Othello, Iago, and/or Emilia, white becomes the minority. Thus, Scott's concept offers for both white and black members in the audience the experience of racial isolation. The image of the

⁵ See Appendix C

white Desdemona as the “other” in this play is enhanced as they make the voyage to Cyprus. For, in addition to having left behind the majority white society she is accustomed to, she now locates herself in a society in which a black man, Othello, rules. Critic Miranda Johnson-Haddad comments on her experience watching this scene: “In Cyprus, Desdemona became the outsider, and as the play progressed, we had an increasing sense that she had fallen into a situation where the customs were not her own and she did not know the rules of the game” (476).

The discomfort of racial isolation experienced by Desdemona in this production concept lends new insight into her willingness to help Michael Cassio regain his position after Othello has discharged him as his lieutenant. For upon Cassio’s dismissal, Othello grants further authority to Iago by placing him in charge of policing Cyprus: “Iago, look with care about the town / And silence those whom this vile brawl distracted” (II. iii. 262-63). Now that the white Cassio no longer holds the second line of authority on the island, power is given all the more to the black men. Due to the white Cassio’s broken tie with the ruling Othello, Desdemona’s sense of security in this foreign land is lost and she demonstrates an eagerness to help Cassio recover his position. Much like the support shared between Othello and Iago as the minorities among the white Venetian society, one is able to understand this powerful connection Desdemona and Cassio display as “outsiders” on the island of Cyprus. Cassio appeals to the racial bond he and Desdemona share when he approaches her for aid: “Bounteous madam, / Whatever shall become of Michael Cassio, / He’s never anything but your true servant” (III. iii. 9-11). Rather than declaring his loyalty to Othello, the man whom he desires to regain service to, Cassio proclaims his true service to Desdemona. She returns this overriding dedication to her

race, claiming, “For thy solicitor shall rather die / Than give thy cause away” (III. iii. 30-31). In this interaction between Cassio and Desdemona, we recognize the manner in which Scott’s production concept reveals the notion that shared race not only unites those within the black race, rather it forms ties among any minority group, even if that group is only temporarily the minority.

As one might suspect, bringing a black Iago to Shakespeare’s *Othello* has a significant effect on the portrayal of Iago and Othello’s relationship. Presenting two central figures in this drama as black men enables this production not only to address relations between blacks and whites but explore the nature of relations between blacks as well. Through witnessing this unique relationship between Iago and Othello unfold, the audience realizes the complexities of race relations, particularly among black minority men.

Much of this production concept’s illumination of the nature of race relations is achieved through costuming. Johnson-Haddad describes that there are scenes in the production in which both Iago and Othello wear clothing reflecting their native culture: “In 2.1, for example, both Othello and Iago wore traditional Nigerian Tuareg headpieces along with their European military garb” (478). The contrast between Iago and Othello’s skin color and that of the white Venetians would establish that a difference exists between these two men and the rest of the Venetian society, yet it is clear that Scott aims to demonstrate more than simply color difference with this production. Iago and Othello’s dress in headpieces from their homeland signifies to the audience that it is not just the color of their skin that differentiates these men from all others but also their culture, traditions, and history. This purposeful costuming confronts the often minimized

view that skin color is the only factor causing difference between races and if we could only look past this difference racial issues could be resolved. Yet, as racial theorist Cornel West points out, overcoming racial strife cannot be achieved through, “[setting] out to show that black people [are] like white people—thereby eliding differences (in history, culture) between whites and blacks” (*Keeping* 17). Truly confronting race difference means admitting it involves much more than skin color; through notable costume choices, Scott’s production concept makes this fundamental recognition.

In addition to using costuming to expose the cultural dissimilarity between blacks and whites, this production concept further manipulates the characters’ dress in order to suggest cultural difference within the same race. Although Iago and Othello both wear similar native head pieces in Act II, Scene i, in other scenes while Othello dresses in African robes Iago only wears the Venetian military uniform. The distinction between the two black men’s outfits is quickly noted by the audience who recalls the picture of Iago and Othello from Act II, Scene i, and the audience is forced to question the meaning of this current difference in costume. As the two minorities within a racist state, Iago and Othello inevitably share much in common, yet this discrepancy in dress suggests they are not identical. Through such variation in costuming, Scott further brings to attention, and cautions against, the impulse to categorize all black people as one in the same. This warning echoes a key message of social scientist Michael Eric Dyson:

While clan, community, and nation were central to African societies, only a cultural catastrophe the magnitude of chattel slavery could impose upon blacks an artificial and single racial identity. . . . Contemporary African-American culture is radically complex and diverse . . . Its vibrant diversity cautions against portraying the constitutive experiences of African-American culture in monolithic terms.
(xv, xiii)

We might derive several conclusions from the difference in costuming that Iago and Othello display: they may have cultural roots in distinct regions or countries; they might be of different class levels; one may prefer to maintain his culture while the other desires to assimilate himself into the Venetian society; and/or due to Iago's lower social standing as an ensign, he may have more at stake if he does not assimilate. Yet, the exact reason for this discrepancy carries less weight than the point it achieves: just as white skin does not signify one shared culture and experience, neither does black skin. In order to begin to "see" or understand the black race, one must recognize the diversity that exists not only between blacks and whites but within the black community as well.

The new portrayal Scott's concept gives to Iago and Othello's relationship is further appreciated when one relates this concept more specifically to the original text of the play. For, with the understanding that both Iago and Othello are black, much of the play's language takes on new meaning. Words that are related to notions of race highlight themselves in new ways in Iago and Othello's dialogues. Iago's statements as well as the audience's understanding of his motive for orchestrating Othello's destruction are interpreted differently as well. As we will see, through this transformed representation of both Iago's character as well as his relationship with Othello, Scott's production concept reveals that shared race not only unites people, but it can powerfully divide those of the same race as well.

As the audience notes Iago and Othello's shared skin color as well as further signs of likeness, such as their similar native costuming, the initial message that this production concept seems to express about relations among black men is that in a foreign culture where blacks are the minority, shared race is a force that can unite black males. This

notion of racial unity among black minorities has been affirmed by many racial theorists. As Paul L. Wachtel states in his book, *Race in the Mind of America*: “Strengthened not only by privation but by positive traditions of mutual aid and support . . . the psychic ties of African Americans to their group, the sense of racial and cultural affinity and of shared fate, are often extremely powerful.” Wachtel goes on to describe this strong connection often experienced between black minority men:

Black friends, colleagues, and students who attended the Million Man March have described a special thrill in their warm and emotional encounters with other African American men, and explicitly noted the contrast with their usual experience. Some referred specifically to the ‘look of threat’ that they often have encountered in other circumstances, and to how much it meant to them to be able to look another African American man (a stranger) in the eye and feel safe. (172)

In relating Scott’s concept to the text of the play, we recognize many moments in which this powerful racial bond that Wachtel describes manifests itself in Iago and Othello’s relationship. For example; as Iago rushes in Act I, Scene ii to warn Othello of Brabantio’s rage over Othello’s elopement with Desdemona, Othello, and all others unaware of Iago’s evil motives, might interpret this as an act of one black man looking out for his own--preparing him for an attack from the whites. Yet, the audience is aware that Iago’s true intentions oppose what racial bond might suggest. For, it was Iago himself who moments earlier set out to evoke this anger in Brabantio towards Othello when he awoke the Senator and grossly proclaimed: “I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs” (I. i. 128-30).

Looking closely at Act III, Scene iii, the crucial moment in which Iago must convince Othello of his beloved Desdemona’s unfaithfulness, one notes that this notion of racial bond can be seen as a significant force that this black Iago manipulates in order

to win the trust of Othello. As this dialogue begins between the two, Othello responds to Iago's fabricated preoccupation: "If thou dost love me, / Show me thy thought" (III. iii. 134-35). Iago immediately answers, "My lord, you know I love you" (III. iii. 136). Iago's response in this production carries not only the meaning that he loves the Moor as his ancient but more powerfully as his racial brother. Out of all the men serving and advising Othello, Iago reminds him, "you *know* I love you." Having established his overriding fidelity to Othello, Iago then is free to more aggressively manipulate Othello without Othello suspecting his destructive motives. As his deceptive language directs Othello towards Iago's goal of jealous rage, Iago is seen again appealing to these notions of racial bond. He demonstrates an artificial attempt to prevent Othello from giving way to jealousy, stating, "Good heaven, the souls of all my tribe defend / From jealousy!" (III. iii. 201-02). His use of the word *tribe* again evokes the racial history that he and Othello share and further suggests that the jealousy Othello is falling into is not something honorable among his and Othello's race. He thus turns the responsibility of Othello's rage onto Othello, and establishes himself as one attempting to save his fellow black man from failing to uphold the standards of their people.

Thus, it is not simply this black Iago's cunning skills, but more specifically his exploitation of the racial bond he and Othello form within the white Venetian society that secures Othello's trust in him. At the conclusion of this scene, Othello is assuredly convinced that not only his wife has been unfaithful to him but, in this production concept, that the white race he trusted has betrayed him. For, the white Desdemona and the white Cassio, the two members of the Venetian state that Othello has closest relations with, have cuckolded him and the only person in Venice seemingly loyal enough to

inform Othello is the black Iago. Iago asserts his empathy, which now is understood as racial empathy, for Othello: “Witness that here Iago doth give up / The execution of his wit, hands, heart / To wronged Othello’s service! Let him command / And to obey shall be in me remorse, / What bloody business ever” (III. iii. 521-25). Considering that these two black minorities share the same hope for just treatment, Iago’s pledge to sacrifice himself out of compassion for his abused fellow black man must seem very believable to Othello. Othello’s final statement in this scene reflects his new understanding of who is truly for him and who is against him. He declares, “Now art thou my lieutenant” (III. iii. 536), as though correcting his earlier, blinded and naive decision to entrust a white man, Cassio, to his service. The force of racial bond displayed between these two men only increases as this black Iago then proclaims to Othello, “I am your own for ever” (III. iii. 537), and the lights fade closing the scene. We can imagine the power of this final moment as, Johnson-Haddad reports, both Iago and Othello declare their loyalty to one another with arms “lifted” and fists “clenched” (478). For, the meaning of this Iago’s “I am your own for ever” clearly refers to race, carrying with it not only future commitment but a tie that has always existed. “I am your own for ever,” Shakespeare scripted Iago to state, or as this Iago can claim, I have forever been your own.

The racial bond presented by this production concept achieves the much more believable deception of Othello that Scott longed for. As Johnson-Haddad writes:

Othello’s accepting Iago as his ‘own forever,’ embracing him and taking him in as he does, is to embrace something that here was both utterly alien and utterly intrinsic to himself. . . . in this production there was a reason, and a very basic one, for Othello to trust Iago so unquestioningly in the first place. (478)

Coupled with these more reasonable circumstances is the demonstration of the force of racial unity. For here, as Othello dismisses both Cassio and Desdemona's history of loyalty to him and trusts in Iago, racial ties prove stronger than both military and marriage bonds. Scott's production concept exposes a common value that Dyson describes maintains its vitality within many contemporary black American communities: "Loyalty to race has been historically construed as primary and unquestioning allegiance to the racial quest for freedom and the refusal to betray that quest to personal benefit or the diverting pursuit of lesser goals" (xviii). It is this racial bond that Dyson suggests is essential to black relationships even today in the US and which Scott presents in his contemporary production of *Othello*.

In further investigating the impact Scott's production concept has on the portrayal of Iago and Othello's relationship, one discovers that in addition to revealing the racial loyalty that commonly exists among black minorities, this Afrocentric production demonstrates the tension and strife that can arise within black minority relations as well. For although Scott's Iago and Othello share the same race and endure common obstacles of oppression in the Venetian society, they have come to occupy distinct positions in this white world. In contrast to Iago, Othello has achieved a position of high ranking within the white military and has married a white woman: in both public and private sectors Othello appears more successful. Such success in this production concept proves to generate both criticism and jealousy from the less accomplished Iago. As one finds, it is this competitive friction that exists between Scott's Iago and Othello that is directly related to a new understanding in this production concept of Iago's motive for causing Othello's destruction.

When originally performed, Shakespeare's play challenged the 17th century meaning of *black* and *white* by demonstrating Othello's unexpected success and favor in the white Venetian society. Thus, from the beginning of the play the audience is informed of Othello's accomplishments. Although he is black, he holds the honorable position of commanding the Venetian forces and is looked upon for leadership in the attack of Cyprus. He is considered by all a "worthy governor" (II. i. 32) whose presence brings "comfort" (II. i. 91) to all on Cyprus. Not only does he win the romantic affections of Desdemona, but Othello reports that his character attracted the interest of the senator Brabantio, when he states, "Her father loved me, oft invited me; / Still questioned me the story of my life" (I. iii. 143-44).

It is this favor shown towards Othello that is understood to fuel the anger and jealousy of the black Iago who remains marginalized in the Venetian society. For Othello's assimilation into white Venetian life could easily be viewed by a fellow black man as betrayal of his own race. As Dyson discusses, demonstrating an attempt to "fit in" in the white world is often received negatively by other blacks: "Those who detour from familiar forms of racial identity and cultural expression are termed 'oreos' or 'incognegroes' (xviii). Thus, one can imagine this black Iago smirking at the Duke's judgment, "Your son-in-law is far more fair than black" (I. iii. 315), which would convict Othello's white-washed character among the black community. Further, how could this Iago not think less of a fellow black man who has the nerve to equate his murder of the white Desdemona to the action "of one whose hand / (Like the base Indian) threw a pearl away / Richer than all his tribe" (V. ii. 400-02)? Can a black Iago maintain any respect for someone who would claim that the life of one white woman is more valuable than his

entire race? In Iago's eyes Othello's success and assimilation in the white Venetian society not only reduces Othello's personal character to a "sell-out" but it further indicates Othello's betrayal of his race and, thus, Iago himself. Wachtel addresses the tension that arises when one member of the black community succeeds in the larger society: "many blacks do experience the tension, do feel that their success is a sign that they have betrayed, or at the very least have left, the group. . . . There is jealousy, anger and envy from those left behind" (174). This feeling of abandonment is only heightened by Othello choosing the white Cassio over Iago for his lieutenant. Thus, while shared race and oppression demonstrate a powerful bond between black minorities, varied success and mobility in the white world proves a destructive factor.

It is these two factors, the reduction of Othello's character in Iago's view and the sense that Othello has abandoned him for success in the white world, that can be understood as the force that ignites Iago's hatred of the Moor in Scott's production concept. Iago recognizes Othello's favoritism of Cassio over his own race when he explains to Roderigo the reason for Cassio's appointment: "preferment goes by letter and affection, / And not by old gradation, where each second / Stood heir to the first" (I. i. 38-40). Iago acknowledges the choice was simply based on Othello better liking Cassio over himself. Othello's denial of his own for the position is an unpardonable insult to Iago and he questions Roderigo, "Now, sir, be judge yourself, / Whether I in any just term am affined / To love the Moor" (I. i. 40-42). This Iago asks, considering that Othello demonstrates no loyalty to his own, can there be any reason that I should remain true to him?

Othello's success within the Venetian society, coupled with his seeming rejection of his and Iago's race and his personal rejection of Iago, thus brings new insight to Iago's motive in orchestrating Othello's downfall. In contrast to the traditional explanations of Iago's actions as racial hatred or, as Samuel Coleridge famously hypothesized, "motiveless malignity," Scott's Iago allows for new speculation. This black Iago is motivated both by his belief that Othello has rejected their race as well as his jealousy of Othello's success in the white world. His haunting assertion, "I hate the Moor," echoes throughout the play and expresses his inability to live with the fact that Othello has overcome the obstacles of racial oppression that continue to hinder him. Unable to accept Othello's surpassing achievements, Iago determines to destroy his fellow black man's success. This black Iago's actions reveal the symptoms of what Dyson explains is known within the black community as "crab-barreling." Dyson describes:

This familiar black cultural metaphor compares the plight of African-Americans to crabs in a barrel that, instead of pooling their resources to help free each other, prevent the successful escape of any member through the self-defeating activity of mutual clawing. More specifically the comparison captures the untamed envy on the part of some blacks for another black's social mobility, economic well-being, or educational accomplishment, assuming the form of hostile hints of personal defect or outright character assassination. (xix)

Iago, driven by an untamed jealousy of Othello and related sense of personal failure, determines to destroy what he cannot attain himself.

Although Shakespeare originally crafted Iago as a white man, a black Iago brings a clearly distinct yet equally powerful dynamic to Othello and Iago's relationship. The lack of problems to arise from such a dramatic alteration of the play is surprising. Even

Iago's racial attacks upon Othello are effectively translated. Reporter Jesse Bryant

Wilder recounts Scott's new understanding of Iago's racial slurs in his production:

Scott contends that Iago's racial jabs don't undermine his case for the villain's blackness because, in a quarrel, African Americans often bandy racially barbed epithets. 'It happens all the time,' he says, adding that, as a black man, Iago would better understand the effects of racial aspersions (which he shouts under the cloak of night) than a white man who'd never felt their sting. (18)

As Scott's production concept brings new meaning to Othello's reason for trusting Iago's counsel as well as one's understanding of Iago's motive, this nontraditional casting of Iago further equips Shakespeare's play to explore race relations as never before. Not only are race relations between blacks and whites presented in a richer context, but even more notably, relations between members of the black race are explored for the first time. As Othello entrusts his marriage to the hands of Iago due to his racial bond to him, at the same moment Iago turns his malice on Othello because of the jealousy engendered by this same racial connection: the complexity of racial relations continually unfolds in Scott's production.

The notable effect the nontraditional casting of Iago has on his and Othello's relationship is paralleled by the influence that casting Emilia as a black woman achieves on Emilia and Desdemona's relationship. Where in traditional productions this friendship consists of two white women, both from the white Venetian state, Scott's production concept introduces two women of different race and from distinct worlds. Yet, despite their race and class difference, these two women maintain the kindred friendship Shakespeare intended for them. Such an intimate relationship now shared by women of distinct race transforms the significance of Emilia and Desdemona's companionship and furthers Scott's examination of race relations in this production.

Earlier in this discussion of Scott's production concept for *Othello* the unique portrayal of Desdemona as an outsider among the black Iago, Othello and Emilia was addressed. One will recall Johnson-Haddad's comment: "[As] the play progressed, we had an increasing sense that she had fallen into a situation where the customs were not her own and she did not know the rules of the game" (476). This disorientation that Desdemona experiences in Scott's production influences the nature of her relationship with Emilia. For, in traditional productions Desdemona simply seeks Emilia's friendship in order to confide in her as one woman to another, yet here Emilia's blackness adds a new dimension to their relations. As Desdemona appears less and less familiar with her surroundings in Cyprus and becomes increasingly confused by Othello's actions, Emilia's companionship becomes not only the advice of one woman to another but the counsel of a black woman to a white woman who is unable to understand her black husband's actions.

As Othello demonstrates his jealous anger towards Desdemona, it becomes increasingly clear to both Desdemona and the audience that this woman does not know her husband as well as she hoped to. Yet, while Desdemona's understanding of Othello decreases, Emilia shows clear insight regarding his manner. These two women's distinct perceptions of Othello begin to manifest when Desdemona worries that Othello will find out she has lost the handkerchief he gave her. In reaction to Desdemona's preoccupation, Emilia astutely questions, "Is he not jealous?" (III. iv. 29). Yet, Desdemona denies that any such quality could be part of Othello's character: "Who? he? I think the sun where he was born / Drew all such humors from him" (III. iv. 30-31). Such a response not only reveals Desdemona's false judgment of her husband's character but notably highlights

Desdemona's lack of knowledge concerning Othello's roots. Desdemona, unfamiliar with the place or culture in which Othello was born, naively assumes Othello is distinct from all other men and believes jealousy is simply not a part of Othello's nature. Yet Emilia, who was born under the same "sun where [Othello] was born," displays clearer insight into her fellow black man's character. Later, Othello's further signs of jealousy cause Emilia to perceptively question once again, "Is not this man jealous?" (III. iv. 112), and Desdemona now appears much less confident concerning her husband: "I ne'er saw this before" (III. iv. 113). Johnson-Haddad describes the unique meaning a black Emilia brings to the insight Emilia demonstrates with respect to Othello:

Emilia's 'Is not this man jealous?' was thus more than the commonsense observation of someone with a more objective perspective on Othello's behavior than Desdemona possessed; it was the recognition of someone more familiar with Othello's background and cultural context than Desdemona could perhaps ever hope to be. (476)

As Johnson-Haddad suggests, this black Emilia may have a better understanding of the nature and manner displayed by Othello. We might also conclude that Emilia's better judgement of Othello is due to the fact that she is less mystified by one of her own.

Desdemona's naive speculation that Othello is unaffected by jealousy reflects a romanticized vision of him. Emilia, being black herself, recognizes the humanity of black people: to her blacks are not exotic peoples from other lands, but familiar, everyday people. Unlike Desdemona, this Emilia's understanding of Othello is not influenced by a sense of him being exotic and, thus, immune to the typical emotions of common men.

In addition to uniquely accounting for Emilia's insight regarding Othello's character, the racial difference between Scott's Emilia and Desdemona alters one's

interpretation of the scene in which these two women converse about women who cuckold their husbands. Due to Emilia's distinct observation of Othello, when Desdemona later questions her in Act IV, Scene iii, her inquiry suggests an attempt to better understand this black woman who clearly sees things different than her. The dialogue begins when Desdemona asks Emilia about unfaithful women:

Desdemona: Dost thou in conscience think—tell me, Emilia—
That there be women do abuse their husbands
In such gross kind?
Emilia: There be some such, no question.
Desdemona: Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?
Emilia: Why, would not you? (IV. iii. 72-77)

As the conversation develops, Desdemona reveals her inability to understand why any woman might cuckold her husband, even if it were to gain “all the world,” and Emilia explains to her reasons for doing so. Desdemona can find no justification for unfaithfulness, but Emilia explains, “’tis a wrong in your own world” (IV. iii. 95-96). Such a statement reminds the audience of the different worlds from which these two women come. Not only does class level distinguish them but race and culture separate their experiences as well. In contrast to Emilia, Desdemona's class and race are both privileged in this society and, thus, she cannot fathom having the need to cuckold her husband for profit. Emilia, being lower-class and black, understands much more easily the desperate actions one might take to gain what she can only dream about. Within this scene difference is recognized yet companionship is maintained. Although these women are from two unfamiliar worlds, they are able to talk about their distinct views not with the purpose of further separating from one another but with the desire to possibly understand each other.

It is this unique ability of Emilia and Desdemona to engage in a kindred relationship despite racial and class difference that sets them apart from all others in this production. For, through such malice displayed between Brabantio and Othello, Iago and Othello, Iago and Cassio, and Cassio and Roderigo, back-stabbing and deceit prove to exist in relationships between black, black and white, and white men in this production. In contrast to the violent nature of all male relations stand Emilia and Desdemona. Although their relationship is not void of difference, they recognize a point of connection and demonstrate an overwhelming dedication to each other.

Rather than allowing race and class to define them as different, Desdemona and Emilia employ the oppressed state they share as women in order to connect. Emilia points out this common lot she and Desdemona face when she states, “’Tis not a year or two shows us a man. / They are all but stomachs, and we all but food; / They eat us hungerly, and when they are full, / They belch us” (III. iv. 116-19). This recognition that “we are all but food” and that men “eat *us* hungerly” emphasizes Emilia and Desdemona’s same experience in a patriarchal society. It is this shared, oppressed state that unites them and causes them to protect and defend each other. Desdemona demonstrates this desire to look out for Emilia when, in reaction to Iago’s sexist remarks in Act II, Scene i, she advises, “Do not learn of him, Emilia, though he be thy husband” (190-91). Yet, due to Desdemona suffering much more consequential attacks from men in this play, Emilia’s attempt to defend Desdemona from the abuse of men is more apparent.

As the play develops, this black Emilia’s loyalty to her fellow woman proves stronger than her commitment to racial ties. In Act IV, Scene ii Emilia defends

Desdemona's honor to her fellow black man, Othello, stating, "I durst, my lord, to wager, she is honest, / Lay down my soul at stake" (14-15). Within this line, Emilia reveals her loyalty to both Othello, her "lord," and to Desdemona, whose purity she wagers her soul on. Yet as the play continues and Othello persists in his accusation of Desdemona, Scott's Emilia, in remaining devoted to her lady, must sacrifice loyalty to her race. This fidelity manifests itself as Emilia, angered by Othello's unjust treatment of Desdemona, proclaims to her lady, "I would you had never seen him!" (IV. iii. 20). The choice to remain true to Desdemona only increases in the final scenes. When she realizes Othello has murdered Desdemona, Emilia proclaims, "O, the more angel she, / And you the blacker devil!" (V. ii. 157-58), and soon after refers to Othello as Desdemona's "most filthy bargain" (189). Such racist language spoken in this production by a black Emilia to a black Othello resonates in a manner distinct from traditional productions. For, in this black Emilia's use of racial insults, she pointedly demonstrates her overriding commitment to the true actions of her fellow woman rather than the false actions of her race. Considering that both the black Iago and Othello have acted with dishonor in this play, one might further understand Emilia's racial attack as an illustration of the shame these two men have brought upon their race. A black Emilia proclaiming to a black Othello, "O, the more angel she, / And you the blacker devil," forces Othello to recognize the shameful truth that he has acted in the base manner false stereotypes expect of him.

Emilia's final actions seal her dedication to her gender over both race and marriage ties as she announces, "I'll kill myself for grief" (IV. ii. 227), yet before doing so she is determined to restore the honor of her lady. In order to proclaim the truth concerning Desdemona's loyalty to Othello Emilia sacrifices her own name: "Let heaven

and men and devils, let them all, / All, all, cry shame against me, yet I'll speak" (IV. ii. 259-60). This sacrifice of her own reputation for her fellow woman is soon followed by the sacrifice of her life when Iago kills Emilia. Her final wish signifies her overwhelming loyalty to Desdemona as she requests, "Ay, ay. O, lay me by my mistress' side" (IV. ii. 281).

Although Desdemona and Emilia both lie murdered, the sight of these two women side by side becomes an emblem of peace in this production. For where all others, both black and white men, fight against each other in this play, these two are the only who fight for one another. In Scott's production concept Emilia and Desdemona overcome the strife of racial and class difference and form a kindred union as women. Through their relationship, this production concept offers a means to transcend dividing differences and connect on a human level.

As one has seen, Hal Scott's production concept for *Othello* significantly alters the meaning and effect of Shakespeare's original play. For the first time this play not only represents black as the outsider, but the white race is shown as the other as well. Racial difference is notably presented not only as color but as cultural and historical difference through innovative use of costuming. Further, through the shared skin color of Iago and Othello, Scott paints their relationship in an Afrocentric light and explores those forces that can either strengthen or destroy relations between black minorities. This new examination of relations between black minority males lends distinct meaning to the motive of Iago in devising Othello's fall from an honorable Moor. Contemporary audiences additionally note that this concept does not exclude women from its enriching examination of race relations; rather the black Emilia and white Desdemona's

relationship offers new means to discuss these relations even further. Desdemona and Emilia provide a refreshing look at the complex nature of racial tension, presenting possible ways to move past racial difference in order to enter into peaceful relations. Thus, in producing *Othello* for contemporary American society, Hal Scott recognizes the complexity of race relations in this day and age yet does not suggest that these complexities render racial issues irresolvable. Rather he seems to suggest the very need to acknowledge the many layers that lie beneath the term “race relations” in order to sincerely recognize and begin to deal with racial issues in society today.

JUDE KELLY AND PATRICK STEWART'S PRODUCTION CONCEPT

As we discussed in the previous chapter, in his production concept for *Othello* Hal Scott cast Iago and Emilia nontraditionally with black actors with the purpose, as he explains in the playbill, of bringing an “Afrocentric (rather than Eurocentric)” understanding to Shakespeare’s original play. Primarily Scott hoped this nontraditional casting would make Othello’s trust in Iago much more believable. Yet, as seen in the previous discussion of Scott’s concept, his nontraditional casting has a profound impact not only on Othello and Iago’s relationship but on all aspects of the play. Scott’s concept enables Shakespeare’s play to investigate the many components of race relations within the US today. This production concept for *Othello* causes its contemporary audience to recognize the complex nature of race relations and enables them to begin to better understand the nature of race and racism within their own society. Turning to examine the second production concept that proves relevant to this study of contemporary productions of *Othello*, we encounter another nontraditional casting of Shakespeare’s play. Yet, the nontraditional casting that director Jude Kelly and actor Patrick Stewart bring to the play has a distinct purpose. Rather than aiming to produce an Afrocentric view of Shakespeare’s play, in 1997 Kelly and Stewart aspired to produce *Othello* in a manner that would speak to a Eurocentric audience in a more significant way.

The concept originated with Stewart who since the age of fourteen awaited the day in which he would play the powerful role of Othello yet as an adult recognized he would no longer feel comfortable, nor would it be socially accepted, to play the part in black-face. Determined by his childhood dream, Stewart devised a production concept that completely remodels the racial roles of the play; attempting a nontraditional casting

far more radical than Hal Scott's production, Stewart proposed to play Othello as a white man and have all other traditionally white roles performed by black actors. Stewart approached Kelly with his idea to play Othello himself, yet Kelly initially declined directing the production, assuming Stewart intended to perform Othello in black-face. After further explanation she agreed to take part in this refashioning of race in *Othello*, dubbing their production concept a "photo-negative" of Shakespeare's original play.⁶

As Kelly and Stewart further defined the terms of their innovative production concept, they decided that it would take place in a contemporary setting and Othello was to be understood as a white mercenary engaged in a black republic. In presenting a white man as the "other" or outsider within an all black society, Kelly intended that this production would, "make white audiences experience some of the feelings of isolation and discomfort that black people experience all of the time in their lives" (qtd. in Gardner). Although Shakespeare's original setting and racial roles would be significantly altered, Kelly and Stewart resolved to leave one element unchanged. After much thought, despite such lines referring to Othello's "black . . . own face" (III. iii. 435-36) and Desdemona's "whiter skin . . . than snow" (V. ii. 6) which occur throughout the play, Kelly and Stewart chose to maintain all of the play's original language. Stewart explains his purpose in making this crucial decision: "I continue to feel that whatever was reverberating from this production should continue to reverberate, because of all the dialogue related to color, race, and so forth" (qtd. in Johnson-Haddad 11). Kelly and Stewart resisted the temptation to simplify the production through adjusting the racial language in fear that it would strip the play of the racial tension so inherent in Shakespeare's original text.

⁶ See Appendix D

Thus, where Scott's production concept aims at creating a more honest and sincere representation of race relations in order to enlighten both black and white audience members alike, Kelly/Stewart's concept transforms race relations in *Othello* primarily for the benefit of the white audience member. This photo-negative concept strives to create for the white person a sense of the threatened and oppressed existence that the black person endures in a white-dominated world. Further, by allowing the white person to see him or herself as the oppressed minority, this production intends to bring its white audience members to reassess their privileged position among society. The aspirations of Kelly/Stewart's concept are quite commendable in its attempt to bring the white person to a clearer, more empathetic, understanding of the black person's racially oppressed condition. Yet, in examining the manner in which Kelly and Stewart try to make their photo-negative concept work, and their various failures in doing so, we come to recognize that rather than creating a production that allows the white person to better understand the black person's condition, this production concept for *Othello* demonstrates the white person's very challenge in truly comprehending the black person's racially oppressed state. We find that although the production disappoints Kelly and Stewart's original intentions when designing the photo-negative concept, this production does not fail to reveal something significant concerning the contemporary state of race relations in the US. Rather, it is because of the failures within the production that the white person's persisting ignorance regarding the complexities of racism is exposed.

Before Kelly and Stewart's production concept was ever performed, and thus before it could be determined a success or failure, it had already begun to reveal the

condition of race relations in the contemporary US. For, in their effort to produce their photo-negative of *Othello*, Kelly and Stewart were hindered by a popular fear within the white community to attempt this exploration of race. Kelly and Stewart report being denied by three theaters, one Britain and two US, before Michael Kahn, the artistic director of the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington DC, agreed to stage the production. Kahn explains, “I don’t think it is politically incorrect. But maybe they (the other theaters) did” (qtd. in Pressley). Rather than “thinking” the concept was socially unacceptable, recalling recent events in the theater, these other directors may have felt certain that the production would not be well received. For only a few years prior, in 1990, a nation-wide tour of a regional theater’s production starring Michael Gambon, a white actor, as Othello was canceled after a powerful letter of protest was received from a wardrobe mistress in one of the theaters the tour planned to visit. Reporter John Peter writes, “Nobody wanted a public controversy, and the tour, as well as the hope for a London run, was scrapped. The writer of the letter was white.” Peter explains that such protests are often made by white activists due to their fear that a white actor playing a black role “insults black people by patronizing them.” We would hope that our social conscience could no longer dream of someone attempting to patronize a black person on the public stage and would be able to recognize that a white man playing a black role is doing so for artistic purposes, not racist ones. Yet, as this letter and the rejection of three prominent theaters testify, an insecurity concerning race relations is still prominent within American society; much of America continues to resist a serious examination of such a sensitive matter as racism. Though, we must note the irony regarding the city that Kelly and Stewart’s production eventually landed in. Sixty percent of Washington DC is black,

yet it is the minority white population that holds the power and makes all of the decisions, and goes to the theater. It seems an ideal, and at the same time perverse, setting for this production that attempts to rearrange race relations in hopes of better understanding them.

We will soon begin an examination of the problems that Kelly and Stewart's production concept confronts once on stage, yet prior to this it is necessary to recognize that the failures demonstrated by the production are the result of a crucial fault that lies within the original concept. The intent of the Kelly/Stewart concept, as earlier noted, is "to make white audiences experience some of the feelings of isolation and discomfort that black people experience all of the time in their lives" (Kelly qtd. in Gardner). In order to carry this out, Kelly and Stewart reverse the racial roles, presenting a white man as the outsider on stage. Kelly further describes the nature of the concept: "What's complicated in terms of perception in this production is that Patrick isn't playing a white man—he's playing a black man, although he is white. It's the audience that has to make the adjustment" (Kuchwara 1). Although Stewart is white, through the race-reversed fashion of this production, he is intended to portray the isolated and oppressed condition that is common to the black person's existence. Yet, in order to enable the white Stewart to play a black man, the only aspect of the play that Kelly/Stewart's concept alters is which race constitutes the majority and the which makes up the minority in the Venetian society. The concept assumes that by simply presenting the white man as the minority he will consequently be understood as racially oppressed as well. Yet the very location of Kelly/Stewart's production discredits this assumption. For, although in Washington DC blacks are the majority and whites the minority, it is not the blacks but the minority

whites who are the dominant and privileged members of society. In addition, the concept suggests that Stewart is to be understood as a white mercenary employed in a black republic; this image only further challenges Kelly/Stewart's presumption that white as minority equals white as oppressed. Such an image for Stewart, in contrast, suggests that he has power and authority within the black republic and is not at all the subject of racist oppression. In response to Kelly's assertion that in this race-reversed production, "It is the audience that has to make the adjustment," I suggest that it is rather the concept that must make further adjustments. Kelly/Stewart's concept cannot simplify racism as an issue of majority over minority. As we will see, racism is far more complex than that.

What Kelly/Stewart's concept fails to recognize when designing their photo-negative of *Othello* is that racism was not founded on ideas of majority versus minority but on a set of values and beliefs which, as we have seen, have linked the symbol of black and the black person to notions of sin and a base, foul nature. Earlier in our discussion concerning the meaning of *black* in Shakespeare's age, we saw the power that the symbol of black exercised in the early 17th century. As contemporary critics report, such negative notions of black continue to exist today and, consequently, continue to inflict upon the image of the black person. Racial theorist Robin Kelley describes in his book, *YO' MAMA's DISFUNKTIONAL!*, that although America's current age is one in which segregation has been abolished and black men and women are increasingly achieving positions of authority and success, the black person continues to be regarded negatively by the majority of white America. Kelley writes: "We have been consistently marked as dysfunctional . . . Black people are different. . . . we have been the thing against which normality, whiteness, and functionality have been defined." Kelley further describes:

“The ‘ghetto’ continues to be viewed as the Achilles’ heel in American society, the repository of bad values and economic failure, or the source of a vibrant culture of resistance” (3, 8-9). Cornel West affirms Kelley’s evaluation of the persisting negative stereotype of black people in America today. West additionally explains in *Race Matters* that although white Americans’ perceptions of black people vary, white views share one significant, detrimental aspect: “The common denominator of these [white] views of race is that each still sees black people as a ‘problem people’” (2). He further describes that “white America . . . has continued to resist fully accepting the humanity of blacks” (3). Such resistance has resulted in white America’s continued fear of the black community and effort to remain separate from blacks through maintaining a country of “chocolate cities and vanilla suburbs,” as George Clinton phrased it (qtd. in *Race* 5). It is these “chocolate cities and vanilla suburbs” that not only testify to the persisting negative meaning linked to the black person but also demonstrate the attempt of white America to separate themselves from the black person while quietly ignoring their persisting racist views.

In Kelly/Stewart’s attempt to create a race-reversal of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, they overlook the critical link that connects all of these damaging notions to the black person. Othello in Shakespeare’s original play is not discriminated against because he is the minority; rather it is due to the fact that he is a black man within a white community which believes his black skin signifies his tainted soul and foul nature. He is persecuted not simply because of his skin but due to what his black skin presumably indicates; that is to say, his racial oppression is based on the signifieds (foulness, sin, maliciousness) that his signifier (black skin) indicates. It is this inherent link between the signifier and

signifieds that Shakespeare's play originally challenged four centuries ago, and it is the persistence of this link within our own society that causes racism to continue. Yet, it is this link that Kelly and Stewart overlook in creating their production concept. In order to truly produce a race-reversal of *Othello*, race, the signifier, must not only be reversed but the meaning race represents, the signifieds, must be accordingly reversed as well. Black must be newly linked to indicate good, pure, etc., and white should now signify foul, base, etc. As we will see, Kelly and Stewart's failure to redefine new links between skin color and what these colors signify prohibit their concept from achieving its original intentions.

The problematic nature of reversing racial roles without somehow clearly establishing the new links between the sign of race and what it signifies becomes evident when the white Stewart first comes on stage proposing to be Othello. For, before the entrance of Stewart as Othello, the production begins with what are now two black characters, Iago and Roderigo, conversing about Iago's hate for Othello and Roderigo's desire to steal Othello's wife, Desdemona. The extent of their disfavor of Othello is made clear as Iago asserts, "I do hate him as I do hell pains" (I. i. 170). As these black characters construct their plan to bring destruction upon Othello and express an enraged hatred towards him, such foul actions easily conform with the majority white audience's racist views of blacks; these two black men are acting like many whites fear them to. Stewart's entrance only complicates matters. For, the audience recognizes that it is a white man that these two black men despise and plan to ruin—of course. Yet, this is not the conclusion Kelly and Stewart want the audience to make; although both the beginning action along with the audience's racial prejudice lead them to believe this

production adheres to common racist understanding (the black men are bad and the white man is innocent and good) this production wants the audience to see the opposite.

How can this production achieve its contrasting understanding of black and white in the audience's mind when both the initial scene and racial stereotypes are working against it? When Stewart first steps into light on stage, one notes the production's effort to correct these initial undesired perceptions of the audience. Many critics of the production noted the striking tattoo of a serpent which was "long, blue-green [and imprinted] across his scalp" (Johnson-Haddad 10). In traditional productions, other Othellos have worn tattoos, but these tattoos served the purpose of further mystifying Othello (displaying that Othello is not only black and from a different culture but, even more unlike the civilized Venetians, he also has strange tattoos). Yet, in Kelly/Stewart's production, Stewart's tattoo attempts to achieve a distinct result. Much more than suggesting his exotic nature, this tattoo of a serpent, the ageless sign of evil and malice, aims to brand this white Othello with an outward sign of an inward, foul nature. Traditional Othello's already wear an outward sign that ignites suspicion and fear in the blackness of their skin, and when they step on stage this sign cues feelings of distrust for Othello's character. Yet, Stewart's Othello is devoid of this traditional sign and, therefore, replaces it with another clearly recognized symbol of evil and malice.

The use of a serpent tattoo to mark the white Othello as foul is an admirable effort to somehow correct the majority white audience's inclination to favor a white Othello within a black community. We must note, though, that the use of a serpent tattoo falls short of the purpose of Kelly/Stewart's concept. The concept's intention is to reverse notions of skin color; thus white, in and of itself, should demonstrate Othello's perceived

foul nature, just as black does for the traditional Othello. If additional signs are added to the equation, the harsh nature of racial prejudice is lost. For this concept to be effective, this white Othello must be mistrusted simply because he is white and not because he is a white man with the additional, cautionary sign of a serpent tattoo.

In addition to creating suspicion against a white Othello, the production must lead the audience to perceive purity and goodness in the black Desdemona, played by Patrice Johnson. Yet, having failed to firmly establish the new meaning that black and white now signify, we again see the production struggle to assure that the audience will favor a black Desdemona. In its attempt to communicate Desdemona's purity, the production further reveals its own inability to maintain a clear understanding regarding the reversed notions of black and white. For, in the production's effort to present the blackness of Desdemona as good, it at the same moment contradicts itself by evoking the ageless notion that white is good. This conflicting message increases each time Johnson as Desdemona appears on stage. As critic Johnson-Haddad describes the costumes Desdemona wears in different scenes, the similarity of them all becomes apparent. Johnson-Haddad writes, "Desdemona made her Cyprus entrance . . . in a white pantsuit [and] wide-brimmed white hat." In later performances, costuming changed, but color did not: "By the end of the week, . . . Desdemona arrived in Cyprus wearing a simple white dress." In another scene Johnson notes Desdemona's "white robe" and describes her "white spaghetti-strap gown" in Act V, Scene ii (9). Like many characters intended to be understood as good, Desdemona's purity is signified by her white costuming, yet it is this very meaning connected to white that Kelly/Stewart's production originally planned to reverse. Through the use of white costuming, Desdemona's virtuous and blameless

nature is expressed and immediately recognized by an audience to whom this sign is both familiar and refreshing in a production in which all other recognizable symbols are being overturned. Yet in using white to signify goodness, any preexisting, expressed meaning of black as good and white as bad is uprooted and the production begins to turn around itself. Not only the audience, but the production itself proves incapable of unswervingly committing to the unfamiliar racial notions initially proposed by Kelly/Stewart's concept.

In addition to the problematic nature of using white costuming to express Desdemona's purity, the decision to maintain all the original language of Shakespeare's text further challenges Kelly and Stewart's concept. In an interview, Stewart admits that both he and Kelly struggled when deciding to maintain the original racist language in the play:

I remained committed to not changing the text throughout the production; it was how I'd always imagined it. It was not Jude's first notion . . . I had only one uneasy period of about forty-eight hours when I began to question it. . . . and I wondered, 'Oh my, can we reach our audience more potently by making this simpler?' But that would not have been a way to go. I continue to feel that whatever was reverberating from this production should continue to reverberate, because of all the dialogue related to color, race, and so forth. (qtd. in Johnson-Haddad 11)

Thus, although Othello's skin is now white and all of the other characters are black, the production still presents those moments in which Othello's blackness and Desdemona's whiteness are addressed. Theater critic Charles Spencer from *The Daily Telegraph* supports leaving the language unaltered: "None of the language has been changed, rightly in my view. We still hear 'an old black ram is tupping your white ewe.' Othello still says 'happily, for I am black.' But it genuinely doesn't matter. In this context, 'black' is merely synonymous with 'alien' or 'outsider.'" It is such an assertion as Spencer's,

that maintaining the original racial language of the play “genuinely doesn’t matter” and black can simply be understood as signifying “alien or outsider,” that this study will further explore and demonstrate difficult to accept.

As earlier discussed at the start of this thesis when the original meaning of black in Shakespeare’s *Othello* was defined, *black* in this play as well as in society expresses much more than simply being an alien or outsider. The symbol of blackness more notably indicates that which is foul, disastrous, sinister, dirty, deadly, wicked, etc. In summary, historically everything the white man conceived as bad he objectified in blackness and the black man. Racial theorist, Joel Kovel, refers to this mythical notion of blackness as the “Fantasy of Blackness” and in his book, *White Racism: A Psychohistory*, explains that this racial myth is still at work today: “In essence the Fantasy of Blackness underlies all and invests its historical elaborations with its mark of badness and dirtiness” (64). Asserting that the myth of blackness “underlies all,” Kovel continues to explain that this includes language. He refers to the writings of psychiatrist and person of color, Frantz Fanon, to further discuss the power the “Fantasy of Blackness” exercises in language today. Kovel cites Fanon:

It would be astonishing, if the trouble were taken to bring them all together, to see the vast number of expressions that make the black man the equivalent of sin. In Europe, whether concretely or symbolically, the black man stands for the bad side of the character, As long as one cannot understand this fact, one is doomed to talk in circles about the “black problem.” Blackness, darkness, shadow, shades, night, the labyrinths of the earth, abysmal depths, blacken someone’s reputation; and, on the other side, the bright look of innocence, the white dove of peace, magical, heavenly light. . . . In Europe, that is to say, in every civilized and civilizing country, the Negro is the symbol of sin. (65)

Despite the dramatic feats achieved over the centuries to correct such false, racist notions, ideas equating blackness to foulness and sin have been inscribed into contemporary

language and modes of expression. We are able to note the power such ideas exercise in contemporary language today, recalling words as *black bag*, *blacklist*, *black magic*, *black mail*, *black mark*, *black market*, etc. All such words or phrases are evidence that in the contemporary US, in order to express the corruption or bad nature of something, *black* is a frequently used and commonly understood adjective.

It is the powerful and oppressive force that the words *black* and *blackness* continue to execute in contemporary language that makes Kelly/Stewart's use of Shakespeare's original language problematic to the intentions of their production concept. For, when the word *black* is used today, although it does not evoke an overt sense of racism, resonating within this word is the notion that black, and thus the black person, is bad, corrupt, inferior, etc. Such elusive racial notions, Kovel explains, are unknowingly stored "in a remote attic-room of [the] consciousness" and have the power to influence the white person's thinking and treatment of black people (52). It is this language, which contributes to the persisting oppression of the black person, that Kelly and Stewart chose to maintain in their race-reversed concept of *Othello*. Thus, although racist statements in this production are directed at the white person and are spoken by blacks, the language used continues to enforce a negative meaning connected to black, not white.

Looking closer at the racial language of the text and considering Kelly and Stewart's race-reversed characters stating these lines, we note both the awkward and undesired effect that maintaining Shakespeare's original language achieves: this can first be recognized upon examining some of the racist lines spoken by Othello. The racial language that the critics most widely mentioned when discussing the workings of

Kelly/Stewart's production was Othello's statement in Act III, Scene iii: "Haply, for I am black / And have not those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have" (298-300). Some critics simply questioned how the production proposed to get around a white man's blatant declaration of blackness, yet others, like Charles Spencer mentioned earlier, attempted to resolve the strangeness of this statement by proposing that black is intended to mean "alien" or "outsider." Yet, we have come to see that black does not simply mean alien or outsider, and this is indicated in this statement by Othello. For, following the acknowledgment of his blackness, Othello continues to describe the consequences of being black; due to being black he cannot speak in the gentle, eloquent manner that the Venetians favor. Therefore, Othello's blackness does not merely make him an outsider but suggests he is a lesser person. Much like the use of *black* in such words as *black book* or *black list* which the *OED* explains "indicate disgrace," Othello's use of *black* here expresses his inferior, base nature. Although this Othello is white, he is using the oppressive notions of black to describe his inferiority. As Stewart attempts to depict his white Othello as degraded among a black Venetian society, along with expressing his lowly nature, the language this white Othello uses continues to suggest an inferior meaning of black as well. As the audience attempts to move away from the dominant, negative meaning that black holds in society, such lines as this spoken by Othello blow such notions back into the production and distracts the audience from clearly seeing the distinct vision of race Kelly and Stewart intend.

At the conclusion of Act III, Scene iii, as Othello demonstrates he has been lured by Iago into the claws of jealousy, we find once again Othello's use of racial language that proves problematic to the Kelly/Stewart production concept. In expressing his

consumption with jealousy, Othello states: “Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell! / Yield up, O love, thy crown and hearted throne / To tyrannous hate!” (500-02). In reviews of this production no critic expressed concern regarding this statement, for here Othello is not suggesting that he is physically black but referring to a blackness within him. The concept of internal blackness is quite familiar to the white person, and thus it does not seem strange that a white Othello would state this. It is the very familiarity and acceptance of this statement in this production concept that is detrimental to its purpose. “Arise black vengeance,” spoken by a white Othello, reveals a common, racist notion shared by white persons. Kovel describes this when he writes:

Whatever a white man experiences as bad in himself, as springing from what Fanon described as an ‘inordinate black hollow’ in ‘the remotest depth of the European consciousness,’ whatever is forbidden and horrifying in human nature, may be designated as black and projected onto a man whose dark skin and oppressed past fit him to receive the symbol (65-66).

A white Othello declaring, “Arise black vengeance,” clearly expresses the idea described by Kovel and Fanon; this statement demonstrates the white man’s use of the image of blackness, which he objectifies in the black man, to describe the sinful, base conditions within himself. In using this image to depict his inner sin, one can recognize the manner in which the white man at the same moment implies a sense of separation from such evil. For such blackness, he suggests, is merely a concealed part within him, whereas it is what consumes and defines the black person. We can recognize how this dominant symbol of sin as black and represented by the black person, when evoked by the white Othello, opposes the intended meaning of black and white in Kelly/Stewart’s production. Such a statement does not present a white man victimized by cultural notions and society, in contrast, within this moment Stewart’s Othello utilizes the racial image of black as evil to

express his condition and consequently reverts back to the racist notions and language of contemporary US culture. Language enacts the continued oppression of blacks in this play.

Kelly/Stewart's failure to modify the racial language of Shakespeare's text to fit their photo-negative concept not only results in a continued negative presentation of black, but it further disables this production from demonstrating the power that negative racial language and images exercise within a society. Where in Shakespeare's original play Roderigo referring to Othello as "thick-lips" (I. i. 70), Iago calling him "an old black ram" (I. i. 96), and Brabantio criticizing his "sooty bosom" (I. i. 85) all express racial attacks upon Othello's person, in Kelly/Stewart's production this racist language loses all significance. At best such references directed towards a white Othello will be ignored by Kelly/Stewart's audience and prove only a minor distraction. Yet, this necessary disregard for the powerful racial language in Shakespeare's play results in the audience's inability to both recognize the influence racist language and images have upon the racially oppressed individual and, more specifically, upon Othello.

In his book, Kovel describes the detrimental impact that negative notions of black have effected upon the black American. Kovel explains that historically the black person in America, surrounded by racist language and images, had little hope of acquiring a positive self-image. He writes: "The accumulation of negative images forced upon blacks in America amounted to presenting them with one massive and destructive choice: either to hate one's self, as culture so systematically demanded, or to have no self at all, to be nothing" (196). The African American community of the 20th century has made efforts to reverse the destructive images of black through asserting that "Black is

beautiful” and, therefore, reassigning a positive and promising meaning to black. Although such movements provide a newly empowered sense of self-worth for the black individual, racist language and images continue to persist in our culture and wear down black Americans. In *Living with Racism*, co-authors Joe R. Feagin and Melvin P. Sikes describe that for the majority of black America, life is a continual confrontation with damaging racial language and images. The authors cite the writing of a black professor regarding the impact such persisting racial language and images achieve upon black individuals: “we live lives of quiet desperation generated by a litany of *daily* large and small events that, whether or not by design, remind us of our ‘place’ in American society” (23-24). Feagin and Melvin further explain that this constant reminder of black Americans’ negatively viewed position within society threatens the black person’s self-esteem, and without a large support group and various strategies of coping, the black American has little hope for a positive self-image (293-302).

The negative racial language and images that Kovel, Feagin, and Melvin demonstrate as harmful both then and now to the black American’s sense of self-worth can be recognized as contributing factors to the black Othello’s deterioration in Shakespeare’s play. Upon first meeting Shakespeare’s Othello, the audience notes his high regard, both among the Venetian society as well as within himself, as the “noble Moor.” Yet, the audience also recognizes the vulnerable condition of Othello’s current, favorable social standing and sense of self-worth; for, behind this noble moor’s back he is the target of such racist name-calling as “the thick-lips” (I. i. 70) and “old black ram” (I. i. 96). It only requires Othello overstepping his social boundaries, through marrying the white Desdemona and attempting to become more of an equal than the white

Venetian community will allow, that brings these behind-the-scene racial attacks to the forefront of the play.

Similar to the explanation of the above quoted professor, the racial attacks upon Othello serve to remind him of his “place” within the white Venetian society. This damaging message is most strongly expressed by Othello’s previous supporter, Brabantio. On hearing of his daughter’s marriage to the black Moor, Brabantio reveals his true sentiments concerning Othello’s race and person. Despite any service Othello might provide the state, Brabantio expresses to Othello that he truly regards him as a “foul thief” (I. ii. 76) whose “sooty bosom” (I. ii. 85) disgusts him and whose black appearance Desdemona and all others within the white community “feared to look on” (I. iii. 110). Brabantio concludes that a union between the black Othello and fair Desdemona is simply “Against all rules of nature” (I. ii. 113). The effect of Brabantio’s outright racial attack on Othello at the start of the play is later supplemented by Iago’s subtle reminders of Othello’s racial inferiority as he aims to break down Othello’s confidence. Iago echoes Brabantio’s claim when he reminds Othello that Desdemona did “[seem] to shake and fear your looks” (III. iii. 234). He further emphasizes Othello’s lesser status when he recognizes that Othello’s nature is not equal to “[Desdemona’s] own clime, complexion, and degree” (III. iii. 263).

The transformation Othello’s character demonstrates within the play reveals the impact these verbal racist attacks enact upon Othello’s sense of self-worth. Prior to the negative language Brabantio and others inflict, Othello shows a sense of confidence in himself. He asserts at the beginning of the play that any charge against his nature will be set right by evidence of his character: “My parts, my title, and my perfect soul / Shall

manifest me rightly” (I. ii. 35-36). Yet later in Act III, suffering from both the scars of Brabantio’s blows and Iago’s subtle jabs, the audience finds a weakened man. No longer does he claim for himself an honorable nature, rather he confesses an understanding of his inferior condition: “Haply, for I am black / And have not those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have” (III. iii. 298-300). It is this sense of unworthiness, inspired by racial insults, that leads this once powerful black figure to in the end admit defeat: “She’s gone. I am abused” (III. iii. 302). Having lost all confidence in his own person, Othello can no longer believe in Desdemona’s love for him, a black moor. In her article *Shakespeare and the Ethnic Question*, Sukanta Chaudhuri discusses this destructive effect Brabantio and Iago’s combined racial attacks have on Othello.

Chaudhuri writes:

Racism rouses, and virtually requires, a receptivity in its target. [Othello] sees himself in terms of a racial stereotype, in others’ eyes and thus finally in his own. This recognition destroys the integrity of his being and makes him a participant in the total discriminatory order. Othello falls into the race trap readily, almost preparedly. Beyond the impact of Brabantio’s words, such a fall argues an instilled sense of race, a deep-seated communal conditioning that corrupts relationships and one’s very sense of self. (179-80)

Chaudhuri continues by explaining that the racial attacks inflicted upon Othello are not to be considered the sole cause of the deterioration of this noble moor, yet such threats to his self-worth must be included in the equation. The constant negative mentioning of his blackness, “sooty bosom,” and lesser complexion, Chaudhuri asserts, achieves one result: “His lower impulses are identified with his actual race, his higher ethos with the adoptive culture to which he tries to reassimilate himself . . . The trap has closed. His disintegration is complete: he must subject his ethnic identity to a value-based racial hierarchy” (179).

It is this injurious force that racist language and images exercise upon the racial minority that Kelly/Stewart's production concept fails to demonstrate in choosing to maintain all the original language in Shakespeare's play. The negative use of *black* and black images in references to Othello as "thick-lips," "old black ram," "sooty bosom," or simply "black Othello" are not translated into corresponding racial attacks upon the white race. As a result the powerful influence achieved by racist language in the original play, which not only demonstrates a significant factor in matters of racial oppression but proves a noteworthy determinant in Othello's personal downfall, is lost in Kelly/Stewart's production. The audience's ability to experience and appreciate the innovative racial tensions within this photo-negative of *Othello* is therefore limited.

In further discussing Kelly/Stewart's failure to adjust racist language and images to the race-reversal they enact upon Shakespeare's play, we will appreciate the workings of Desmond Nakano's 1995 movie, *White Man's Burden*. Nakano wrote and directed *White Man's Burden*, in which he aims to represent a race-reversal of contemporary American society. The proposal of the film becomes apparent from the first scene in which a wealthy black family enjoys an elegantly catered meal, served by a white maid, and discusses the problems that white people impose on society. The father, played by Harry Belafonte, is seated at the head of the table and closes the scene pompously conjecturing if the white people are "a people who are beyond being helped." This wealthy black family is then contrasted by the impoverished family and home of white man Pinnock, played by John Travolta. As the movie unfolds it depicts the unjust discrimination of Travolta and other whites living in a nation dominated by blacks. The audience views white slums, black employers' belittling treatment of white, working-

class employees, and unwarranted arrests of innocent white citizens by black police officers.

Clearly, Nakano's film is aiming for the same result as Kelly and Stewart propose with their production concept for *Othello*: "to make white audiences experience some of the feelings of isolation and discomfort that black people experience all of the time in their lives." Yet, differing from Kelly/Stewart's race reversal, Nakano's film does not neglect to demonstrate the inherent role racist language and images exercise in racist communities. Rather, one recognizes a purposeful reversal of racial language and images within the film. The portrayal of reversed negative images is best noted in a scene in which Travolta's car breaks down in a white slum and two black police officers, suspicious of Travolta walking the street at night, end up beating him in front of a crowd of white citizens. After the officers leave, a fellow white man helps Travolta to his feet and the following dialogue occurs:

White man: "What happened man?"

Travolta: "I fit the description is what happened."

White man: "Of course you fit the description man. Yeah of course. See to them you look like him, he looks like you, you look . . . you look like me."

Travolta: "You said that right."

White man: "Especially at night man. You know, you know what happens down here at night don't ya? We scare the shit out of 'em because, see, at night, at night, they think we all look like ghosts man. They think we're just . . . just ghosts, out here blow'n in the dark. Woooo."

Through this dialogue, Nakano brilliantly creates for this race reversal a negative and feared symbol for white. Where the discriminated black person has been lent such images as dark shadows, abysmal depths, dirt, etc., here the white person is associated with an equally feared symbol. Whites are the ghosts that haunt this society and evoke fear and prejudice within black citizens. In relating the feared image of a ghost to white

skin, Nakano's film both presents a deep seated image that this black community associates with white people and additionally shows one of the damaging notions that can be understood as detrimental to a white individual's sense of self-worth.

Nakano again emphasizes the distinct meaning that language and images of black and white hold in this race-reversed society when later in the film Travolta takes his son shopping at the toy store. Signaling to his son through the store window, Travolta encourages him to buy a white action figure, but his son wrinkles his nose in dislike and then points joyfully at the desired object--a black action figure. The audience learns that the super hero's name is Black Hawk, his partner is Chromo-man, and they fight for the "good" side. One notes in this scene the redefining of the image of black as well as the new meaning the word *black* expresses. "Black" Hawk does not signify this super hero's evil or feared nature, as often is the case in a white-dominated society, but rather "black" expresses his good and powerful character. In addition to the interactions that occur between blacks and whites, both words and popular images within this film further define who is considered on the "good" side in this racial battle and who is not.

We must note a final effect that Nakano's film achieves in translating racial language and images to match the race-reversed concept; the ease by which the negative meaning of *black* is transposed onto *white*, and vice versa, exposes the very arbitrary nature of the original meaning given to these words. The ability of the audience to quickly adjust to a reversed understanding of *black* and *white* brings them to recognize that these two words are truly hollow. *Black* and *white* are merely signs that over the years have been yoked to signifieds bearing no intrinsic relation to their sign, thus attaching these signifieds to a new sign does not prove a challenge. *Black* is able to

signify good because it really never was bad in the first place—it was just the forced sign for foulness.

Through the example of Nakano's film *White Man's Burden*, we are able to recognize the elements that Kelly/Stewart's race-reversal production of *Othello* lacks. It has been shown that racism is not inflicted upon the racial minority solely through the suppressive or unjust actions committed by the dominant race. Rather, racist notions have taken an active role in the construction of language and popular images and these cultural terms have come to victimize the racial minority as well. If the racial minority is not suffering racial attacks directly from a member of the dominant race, such assaults might just as frequently fall from racist images in a store window or language in a news article. As *White Man's Burden* demonstrates, racism taints all aspects of society. In neglecting to newly establish racist language and images in their production concept for *Othello*, Kelly and Stewart fail to truly represent a racist society and thus cheat their innovative production concept for *Othello* of its promising potential.

CONCLUSION

Is this the noble Moor whom our full senate / Call all in all sufficient?

Such is the question that the nobleman Lodovico sets forth in Act IV, Scene i of *Othello*. It is this same question, yet in a distinct context, that following the original production of Shakespeare's play those directors desiring to produce *Othello* for their own day and age have continued to raise over the centuries. These directors take on *Othello* in appreciation of the play's ability to confront the issues of racism that have infected society since ancient times. Yet, in their recognition of the ageless nature of racism, these directors do not disregard racism's ever-changing quality as well. They acknowledge that although race relations have evoked conflict throughout the centuries, the character of racism has significantly transformed. Where racism in Shakespeare's age was overt and founded on a moral and religious belief that persons with black skin were morally tainted, racism in today's society is now camouflaged with political correctness and generated by a myriad of influences which are often difficult to define. Despite the transformation racism has undergone over the centuries and the many ways it has been remedied, it continues to infect society and demands further examination. Thus, at the forefront of the director's mind when hoping to produce a meaningful production of *Othello* is this question: Considering the racial atmosphere of this age, how might *Othello* be produced to address this age of racism and affect a contemporary audience as powerfully as it originally did in Shakespeare's day? That is to say, in order to significantly address this contemporary environment of race relations, what does it mean to portray an Othello that is "all in all sufficient"?

In 1943, Margaret Webster and Paul Robeson demonstrated this need to create for their society an *Othello* that would address its unique racial climate. For, the central issue to racism in America in the 1940's was no longer the unfounded belief of the 17th century that blacks were morally tainted but, rather, the unjustifiable oppression of the black person from becoming a citizen with equal rights and power. In order to produce *Othello* in a manner that confronted the racial issues of their time, Webster and Robeson did on stage what continued to be prohibited in society; they gave the starring role traditionally played by white actors to a black man and demonstrated that the black person is equally deserving and capable of fulfilling both theatrical and social roles historically reserved for whites only. Applauding the art and talent of a black actor in the theater forced Webster and Robeson's white audiences to confront their unjustified refusal to acknowledge such talents exhibited by blacks in all realms of society.

Contemporary America again presents us with a transformed racial atmosphere, and directors Hal Scott, Jude Kelly and Patrick Stewart have aimed to refashion their productions of Shakespeare's *Othello* accordingly. Although the Scott and Kelly/Stewart productions share the same goal of remodeling Shakespeare's play in order to better explore contemporary race relations, the manner in which the two productions attempt to achieve this common objective is quite distinct. The contrast between the nature of Scott and Kelly/Stewart's production concepts for *Othello* demonstrates both the diverse approaches taken when exploring race as well as the dissimilar understanding regarding racism that exist in the US today.

In his production concept, Hal Scott deliberately moves away from the traditional Eurocentric representation of the play and aims to present *Othello* through his own

insightful lenses as a black man and former Othello. By altering Iago and Emilia's race in the play in order to make Othello's trust in Iago more realistic, Scott offers an Afrocentric interpretation of Shakespeare's work. Scott's tailoring of the racial roles additionally brings a black community to *Othello* and opens many new avenues by which race relations can now be explored. Race relations unfold on all levels and reveal that, contrary to what traditional productions of *Othello* suggest, the problem of contemporary racism cannot be discussed simply in terms of black and white. Rather in Scott's production, the animosity and jealousy evoked between a black Iago and the black Othello as they both endure oppression from the white Venetian state exposes the detrimental impact that racism achieves upon relations not only between different races but also among members of the same race. As tension and strife increase between members of both the same and distinct races, this production of *Othello* renders the issue of racism and race relations far more complex than most acknowledge.

Yet, Scott does not disclose the complex nature of racism to declare it an incurable social ill. It is only through exposing race relations in every part of society that this production is then able to suggest a means for overcoming racial strife. For due to his alteration of the play, the audience sees a unique representation of the relationship between a now black Emilia and the white Desdemona. Although these two women cease to share the same race, they maintain the original bond Shakespeare envisioned them to have. They engage in the conversations of the traditional Emilia and Desdemona, yet now as they discuss their distinct opinions and perceptions of the world, such differences appear the result of their dissimilar cultures and race. The audience witnesses as the discovery of racial and cultural difference between these two women

does not cause them to refrain from further conversation, but rather it encourages them to seek a better understanding of one another. Difference inspires dialogue between Emilia and Desdemona, and it is through their conversations in the play that a kindred relationship evolves. They do not attempt to ignore racial difference, yet they neither allow race to determine the nature of their relationship. In acknowledging race and racial difference, they are then able to move past race and connect as two individuals. Through his nontraditional casting of *Othello* and the resulting emblematic relationship demonstrated by a black Emilia and a white Desdemona, Scott's production concept suggests that only in sincerely recognizing the complex nature of racism and racial difference can we hope to advance beyond racial strife and acknowledge the humanity in us all.

Jude Kelly and Patrick Stewart take a distinct approach in their effort to remodel Shakespeare's *Othello* in order to fit the unique racial conditions of contemporary America. Instead of refashioning the play due to the influence of black insight, Kelly and Stewart transform Shakespeare's work with the hope of enabling the white person to gain a better understanding of racism. Through their innovative photo-negative concept for *Othello*, they intend to elevate whites to the level of comprehension and empathy regarding racism that the racially oppressed black person has always known. Yet, as they attempt to make this concept work on stage, Kelly/Stewart's production fails to do what we have seen Scott's production so eloquently achieve; in transforming the racial roles of the play, Kelly and Stewart neglect to assure that the complexities of racism are maintained and, thus, the essence of Shakespeare's work is lost.

Kelly and Stewart's concept mistakenly simplifies racism as an issue of minority versus majority; within the production the visual sign of race is reversed yet racist images and language are never addressed and, thus, maintain their original meaning. Now Othello is white and the rest of the Venetian state is black, but this means very little when the pure Desdemona symbolically dresses in white, Othello continues to be criticized as the "black Moor" and "sooty bosom," and the enraged white Othello still speaks of his inner "black vengeance." The racist images and language that exercise a detrimental role in the racial oppression of the black person in society, as well as in traditional productions of this play, maintain their power. After reversing the racial roles of *Othello*, Kelly and Stewart neglect to define the new meaning race is intended to signify and the equation is never complete. In failing to recognize the complexities of race relations as Hal Scott did, Kelly/Stewart's concept for *Othello* is unable to truly explore racism as it intended.

At the beginning of this thesis it is suggest that in the very attempt of these two productions to speak *to* the American society through Shakespeare's *Othello* something much more profound *about* our society would be revealed. Considering the contrasting natures of Scott and Kelly/Stewart's production concepts as well as their distinct success, one might question if a cohesive conclusion can be derived from the event of these two productions. For, the ability of Scott's production to expose the complexities of racism and race relations, and through this offer a means to overcome racial strife, demonstrates a sense of hope for racial conditions in the US. Yet, Kelly/Stewart's production delivers a contrasting message. Although they intend their production to equip whites with a clearer understanding of racism, their production of *Othello* fails to do so. The

production's inability to successfully reverse racism exposes the white person's persisting failure to truly understand this social ill and, consequently, reveals the white person's lack of understanding for the black person. Therefore, where the Scott production inspires promise, the Kelly/Stewart production destroys such hope.

I suggest that it is the very duality of these two productions that characterizes the contemporary racial condition of our country. For we live in an era that demonstrates an effort, unparalleled by any other moment in American history, to discuss and understand the black American. The black American identity has risen from enduring the inhumane, objectified treatment of chattel slavery, to withstanding a position of inferiority due to segregation, to finally being recognized as a person with significant feelings and talents. In acknowledging the humanity of the black person, America demonstrates a further attempt to understand and appreciate these people who it wrongly rejected for centuries. Thus we see a surge of research and social theory focusing on describing and explaining the black American identity. Such theory first invested in recognizing the detrimental effect that centuries of slavery and the later indignities of segregation have had on the African American individual and community. More recently, such critics as Michael Eric Dyson, Cornel West, and many others examine the current struggles of the black American and study all aspects of the African American community. Their research includes black men, women, children, adults, upper and lower class levels, and the various relationships that evolve between them all. In order to redress racial prejudice and racism, these critics examine the black community in its entirety and, as Dyson explains, "search for truth about black culture wherever it may be found" (xx). Just as Hal Scott demonstrates in his production of *Othello*, contemporary America strives to

understand black Americans not as a monolithic people but as a race and community made up of diverse struggles, experiences, and relations.

Yet, this contemporary interest in understanding the black American and the promising endeavors of these racial theorists is contrasted by the disheartening evidence that such research often reveals. Although white America has shown an interest in repairing racism and sincerely recognizing the black individual, racial theorists explain that the majority of white America is far from truly comprehending the experiences of the black person in America. In *Living With Racism*, Joe R. Reagin and Melvin P. Sikes describe:

Whites have the luxury of looking at matters of racial discrimination with detachment. This viewpoint makes it easier for whites to deny the reality of much of the racism reported by blacks. In contrast, black Americans view racism not with detachment but in terms of their own and their relatives' *experiences* in past and present encounters with white people. (3)

The white person's removal from the experience and effects of racism allow him or her to examine racism when willing and then step away when it is desired. Thus, whites never attain a complete understanding of the various forms of daily racial attacks that black Americans endure. The extensive research of Reagin and Sikes reports that despite the efforts of white America to comprehend the experience of racism, the black American community has yet to feel understood. Reagin and Sikes quote the call of an African American school administrator: "Whites folks need to make an all out effort to learn what it is to be black. They need to see America from Africa to these shores; they need to live and process me. When I say me, I'm talking about what it is to be black. Learn me, try to process what I've been through. . . . in order to think the way I think. Try to see things the way I see them, or I've seen them" (338). This cry of a black American is

echoed by many others in Regin and Sikes study. The validity of this claim that white America fails to understand the conditions of racial discrimination and the black American is affirmed by Kelly and Stewart's failure to successfully reverse racism in their production of *Othello*. Like many white Americans, Kelly and Stewart claimed an understanding of racism, yet in their attempt to manifest this knowledge they instead exhibited a disappointing misunderstanding of the black person's experience.

As the opposing results of the Scott and Kelly/Stewart productions suggest and current racial theory affirms, contemporary America's racial atmosphere harbors both hope and despair. It is only together that the Scott and Kelly/Stewart productions of Shakespeare's *Othello* present us with an accurate portrait of contemporary racial conditions in the US.



1. Paul Robeson as Othello in Margaret Webster's production on Broadway, 1943–44. Photograph © Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center.



2. The 'Temptation' scene with Othello (Paul Robeson) and Iago (Jose Ferrer) in Margaret Webster's production on Broadway, 1943–44. Photograph © Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center.

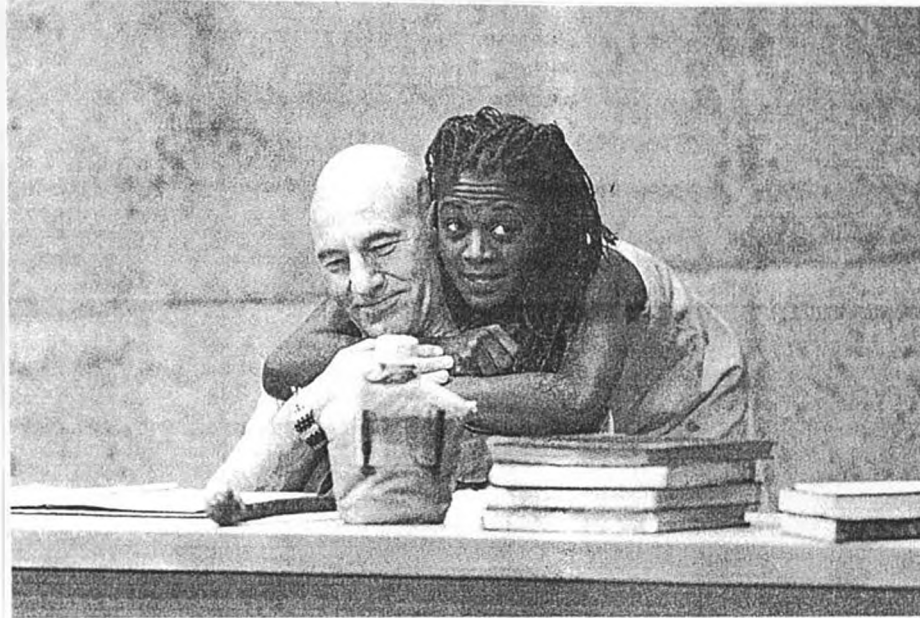


3. The Agony in the Garden. Chichester Missal
(John Rylands Lat. MS. 24).

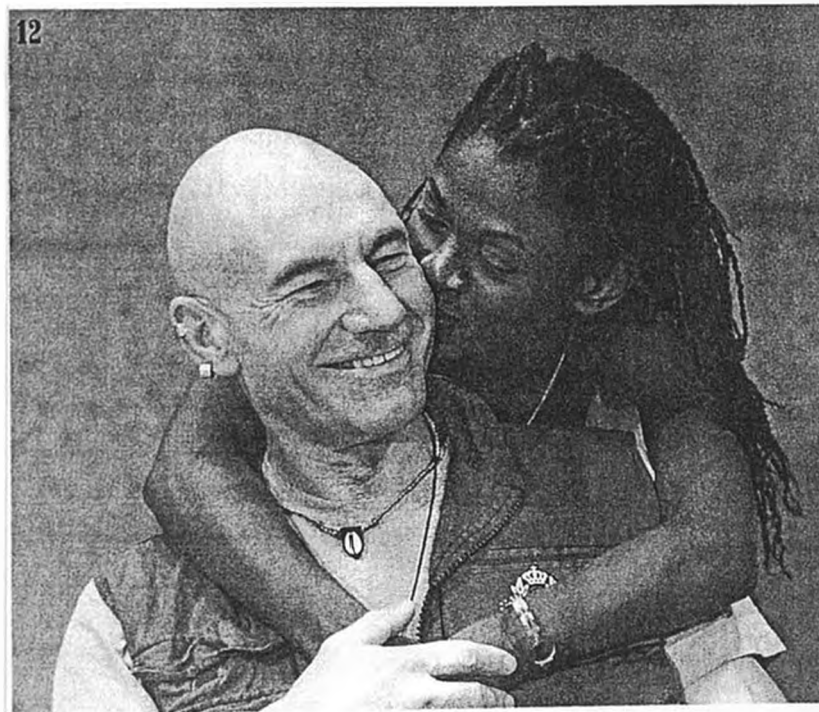


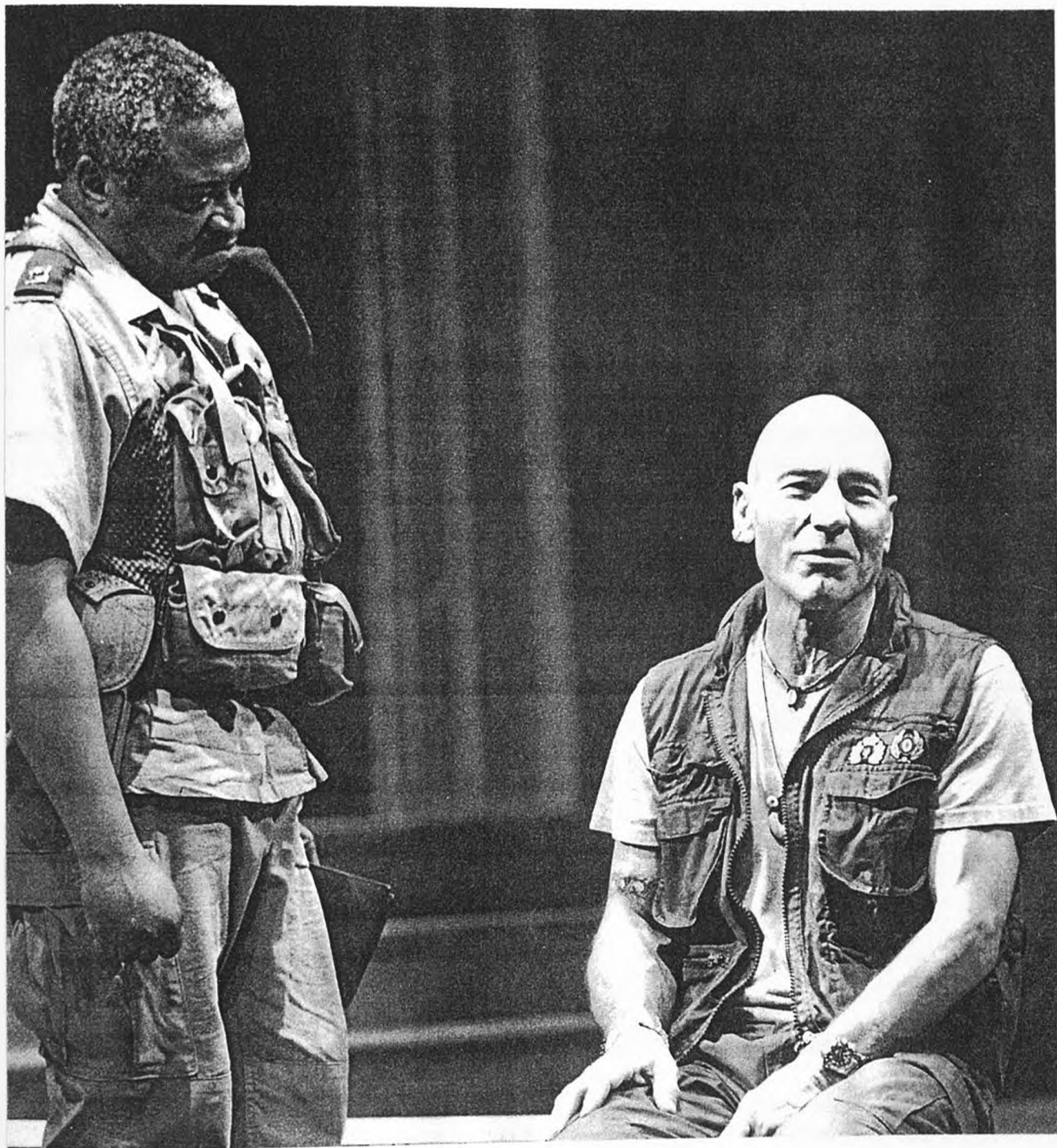






Patrick Stewart as Othello and Patrice Johnson as Desdemona in
The Shakespeare Theatre's *Othello*. Photo by Carol Rosegg.





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