

‘THE MOOR’S ABUSED BY SOME MOST  
VILLAINOUS KNAVE, SOME BASE NOTORIOUS  
KNAVE, SOME SCURVY FELLOW’: LEGAL  
SPACES, RACIAL TRAUMA AND  
SHAKESPEARE’S *THE TRAGEDY OF OTHELLO*,  
*THE MOOR OF VENICE*

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In the early morning hours on 12 October 2019, an African American man, who later identified himself as James Smith, was woken by his niece and nephew who informed him that the front door to a neighbour’s home was ajar. Out of concern, he contacted the non-emergency line for the Fort Worth police in the hopes that officers might conduct a ‘wellness check’.<sup>1</sup> Mr Smith told the non-emergency operator that not only was the front door ajar, but also lights were visible and two vehicles, which he described as sedans, were in the driveway.<sup>2</sup> An officer who was dispatched to the location immediately pulled his weapon when arriving on the scene, as he approached the house. He saw the lights on inside the house. Unbeknown to the occupant of 1203 East Allen Avenue, Atatiana Jefferson, who was playing the *Call of Duty* video game with her 8-year-old nephew, her family would change irreversibly that night.<sup>3</sup> They both heard ‘someone prowling in the bushes’ of the backyard, where they had the door open to catch the night-time breeze. While her nephew wanted to look out the window to see whence the sound came, Atatiana Jefferson, a 28-year-old pre-med biology graduate from Xavier University, refused to let him do so and went herself to check on the source of this disruption to their evening. She was not unfamiliar with

the neighbourhood, as she had recently moved into her mother’s home to care for her. Her mother, who was hospitalized because of complications related to her congestive heart failure, was not in the house – it was just Atatiana Jefferson and her nephew; his mother was also hospitalized, recovering from recent heart surgery. So she went to investigate the disturbance. Without identifying himself as a police officer, Aaron Dean demanded: ‘Put your hands up. Show me your hands.’<sup>4</sup> Then, according to the body-camera video, a ‘split-second’ later, he shot through the screen window – killing Atatiana Jefferson. This shooting would become

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<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Hegerty and Atatiana Jefferson, ‘Why I will no longer call the police’, *BBC News*, 16 June 2020.

<sup>2</sup> WFAA, ‘SOUND: the non-emergency phone call about Atatiana Jefferson before she was killed in her own home’, YouTube, 13 October 2019. WFAA Channel 8 is an ABC affiliate.

<sup>3</sup> Jamie Stengle, ‘Who was Atatiana Jefferson? The woman killed in her home by a Texas cop was devoted to her family, relatives say’, *Chicago Tribune*, 15 October 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Hayley Miller, ‘Atatiana Jefferson’s 8-year-old nephew witnessed her killing, lawyer says’, *Huffington Post Black Voices*, 14 October 2019.

the seventh officer-involved shooting between June and October 2019 for the city of Fort Worth, Texas. Officer Dean, 34 years old, joined the city's police force in 2018 – he resigned before FWPD officials fired him. Later, a weapon was discovered beside Atatiana Jefferson's bloodied body; apparently, she had grabbed a handgun before walking to the window to look in the backyard. Merely one month after her death, her father, Marquis Jefferson, having no previous health issues, died – succumbing to a heart attack.<sup>5</sup> Two months later, her mother, Yolanda Carr, who no longer had the care that her daughter provided, would die in the same house where her daughter met a violent end.<sup>6</sup> Late in the night, Atatiana Jefferson's older sister, Amber Carr, the mother of her two nephews, cries herself to sleep, comforted by her son, the 8-year-old who witnessed the end of his beloved aunt's life. He consoles his mother, wraps his arms around her, and encourages her to breathe.

Each family member suffers from some heart sickness. While this 8-year-old boy attempts to console his mother, who ministers aid to his trauma after he witnessed the violent end to his aunt's life, and the loss of the matriarch and the patriarch of these families? Who heals his psychic wounds? What happens when such mental injuries are unresolved and carried over into manhood? What does a wellness check look like for a person from the African diaspora? What does it mean to have others outside of this community who have care or concern for people of African descent? Historically, within the community, the treatment of the trauma has been almost non-existent.<sup>7</sup> The commodification of African bodies has meant that, as property, they possess no feelings, no emotions, no wounds, nor heartbreak. The confrontation with legal institutions and/or their agents, as evidenced above, make the trauma worse. We will keep those questions in mind as we consider the young boy, Othello, who appears in Venice as a man in Shakespeare's seventeenth-century drama.

This article submits that the socio-psychological and the clinical psychiatric effects of racial trauma on Moors not only emerge on the early modern stage, but also manifest themselves in both legal and cultural consequences for the Moor, and reap identifiable behaviours characterized by the larger society.<sup>8</sup> By focusing on the psychological perspective, I investigate how racial injury affects the perception of the Blackamoor as the stereotypically aggressive and cruelly violent warrior, as framed in legal spaces.<sup>9</sup> While racial trauma has been acknowledged, this narrative has not been read with the Moor, as a military figure across several dramas and playwrights.<sup>10</sup> Specifically, I argue that the space where Othello shares his traumatic narrative is complicated and unsafe. Second, Iago functions as a tool to safeguard ideas of supremacy by racially traumatizing Othello within a conspiratorial framework. Finally, I submit that Othello's suicide and Desdemona's murder serve to represent violent self-hatred and betrayal that stem from the preceding trauma the audience witnesses in the play. I consider the impetuous murder of Desdemona by 'the

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<sup>5</sup> Bob D'Angelo, 'Atatiana Jefferson shooting: victim's father dies of heart attack, family says', *The Atlanta-Journal Constitution*, 10 November 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Erica Pettway, 'Mother dies months after her daughter, Atatiana Jefferson, killed in house by Fort Worth officer', *CBS42.com*, 9 January 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Alex Pieterse, 'Perceived racism and mental health among Black American adults', *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 59 (2012), 1–9.

<sup>8</sup> I presented an earlier version of this article before medical professionals as an Erikson Scholar at the Austen Riggs Center at Stockbridge, Massachusetts, on 26 September 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Naomi Inoue, 'Evaluation of a treatment outcome', *Rorschachiana* 30 (2009), 180–218.

<sup>10</sup> Some scholars have discussed racial trauma in different contexts, including African literature, by Zoe Norridge, *Perceiving Pain in African Literature* (London, 2013), p. 87, and psychology, by Christopher Lane, 'The psychoanalysis of race: an introduction', *Discourse* 19 (Winter 1997), 3–20; p. 7.

warlike Moor’ Othello (2.1.27). Even amidst written proofs of Roderigo and Iago’s conspiracy, by the play’s denouement Othello alone bears the weight of the prosecution. Examining these spaces through multidisciplinary lenses offers an opportunity to represent the past by unpacking the past and the present using literature, medicine and law. ‘To say that “what is known” must include the present will seem self-evident, but it may be less obvious that historical authenticity resides not in the fidelity to an alleged past but in an honesty vis-à-vis the present as it re-presents that past.’<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, I am developing a theory of racialized trauma that evolves among these warriors as they navigate within these early modern dramas, and that yields a method for this society to read and receive this warring Moor.

As I consider legal institutions, I must also embrace how medicine measures trauma.<sup>12</sup> Racial trauma – a persistent consequence of historical trauma – and its effects emerge as devastating across the African diaspora.<sup>13</sup> In effect, this trauma inflicts ‘real and perceived danger, threats’, bystander harm, or events both shameful and humiliating to similar members of the global majority, which include circumstances that are sudden, uncontrollable and ‘emotionally overwhelming’.<sup>14</sup> Racial trauma may present itself in response to racism, including but not limited to discrimination and microaggressions that provoke stress and trauma reactions – and may be recurring, systemic and intergenerational. The effects of racial trauma may devastate one’s wellbeing and physical health, and lead to psychological distress, and a psychosocial impact (i.e., poor self-image and self-hatred), and erosion of familial and communal relationships.<sup>15</sup>

This evolution in the field of psychology yields a framework for discussing William Shakespeare’s play *Othello*, and the critical scholarship offers different interventions for examining the play’s psychological dynamics. Traditionally, and for varied reasons, students, scholars and actors across the

<sup>11</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> For discussion on measuring trauma, see R. Mollica, L. MacDonald, M. Massagli and D. Silove, ‘Measuring trauma – measuring torture: healing the wounds of mass violence: Harvard Trauma Checklist revised (Cambodian version)’, Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma, 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Compare Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome: post-traumatic stress disorder, as defined by the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, involves events that are ‘generally outside the range of usual human experience, such as rape, military combat, bombing, torture, kidnapping, incarceration as a prisoner of war or in a death camp, and accidents or natural catastrophes involving serious and widespread physical injury’. Such events, or ‘stressors’ regularly produce a variety of related symptoms, among them ‘recurrent painful, intrusive recollections of the event’ and dreams or nightmares during which the event is re-experienced; psychic numbing; sleep disorders; hyperalertness; irritability, anxiety, and depression. DSM-IV foregrounds the intrusive recollections and their disruptiveness and expands on the term ‘disassociativelike states’. Recurrent, intrusive recollections, commonly termed flashbacks, can take varying forms, but in general they tend to be powerfully visual, even photographic’: American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders DSM-IV* (Washington, DC, 1994), p. 26. See also Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, 1996).

<sup>14</sup> In 1970, Joseph L. White, considered by many as the ‘godfather’ of the field of Black psychology, published his article ‘Toward a Black psychology’, in which he argued the need to develop a theory of Black psychology that would not have the pitfall that white psychology seems to utilize to analyse the African diaspora (*Ebony* (1970), 5). See also Reginald Jones, *Black Psychology* (New York, 1998). During the late twentieth century, several figures contributed to advancing this field with their work: Frances Cress Welsing’s book *The Isis Papers: The Keys to the Colors* (London, 1991) confronts the truth about the sociopolitical creation of race categories; and Linda James Myers’s book *Understanding an Afrocentric Worldview: An Introduction to an Optimal Psychology* (Washington, DC, 1996) advances the conversation around Africana-centred psychology. See also ‘The Cress Theory of color-confrontation’, *The Black Scholar* 5 (1974), 32–40 by Frances Cress Welsing.

<sup>15</sup> Nkechinyelum A. Chioneso, Carla D. Hunter, Robyn L. Gobin, Shardé McNeil Smith, Ruby Mendenhall and Helen A. Neville, ‘Community healing and resistance through storytelling: a framework to address racial trauma in Africana communities’, *Journal of Black Psychology* 46 (2020), 95–121.

diaspora find the play difficult to receive.<sup>16</sup> Ostensibly, we can hearken back to the concern with the mythology that saturates the oppression of the African diaspora.<sup>17</sup> My article endeavours to dispel these myths, which have been globalized to support racist notions to advance a capitalist agenda. The hijacking of the ‘idea of Africa’, which emerges as the title of V. Y. Mudimbe’s book, speaks to the myth-making phenomenon by actors outside of the diaspora in terms of the continent.<sup>18</sup> We find these notions occur in Shakespeare’s *Othello*, and perhaps earlier in Giraldi Cinthio’s *Hecatommithi* as well.<sup>19</sup> I think we should start from the place where Ben Okri, in his book *A Way of Being Free*, suggests that *Othello* must be viewed as ‘the white man’s myth of the black man’.<sup>20</sup> Kim Hall addresses the manipulation of the conceptions of Blackness in the introduction to her edition of *Othello: Texts and Contexts* (p. 3). In her play *Desdemona*, Toni Morrison extends this mythology as she explains the illogical manner in which Desdemona creates a fantastical narrative about Othello, and delivers an intergenerational exploration of racial trauma. Likewise, Keith Anthony Cobb re-narrates the play in his text *American Moor*, in whose Introduction Kim Hall says: ‘With effort, we can undo and redo the Shakespeare scripts, the scripts about Shakespeare that we have inherited, and the scripts of Anglo-American life.’ Exploring the trauma and the myth-making, Morrison and Cobb take up the cause with this play.<sup>21</sup>

In this article, I examine legal spaces, racial trauma and how we evaluate those circumstances as they evolve from one moment to the next in Shakespeare’s *Othello*. Simply put, I ask: ‘How does Othello defend himself against propaganda, conspiracy, and the weight of evidence amidst these psychic injuries?’

#### DEVELOPING OTHELLO’S THEORY OF DEFENCE

‘For an abuser of the world, a practiser / Of arts inhibited and out of warrant.’ (Brabantio, 1.2.78–9)

Upon the entrance of Brabantio and Othello to the Senate in act 1, scene 3, the Duke of Venice asks: ‘What’s the matter?’ (1.3.59)<sup>22</sup> In essence, the

<sup>16</sup> See Intiaz Habib, ‘Racial impersonation on the Elizabethan stage: the case of Shakespeare playing Aaron’, *Old Dominion University Commons* (2007), 32. See also Keith Hamilton Cobb’s *American Moor* (London and New York, 2020); and Ayanna Thompson’s ‘Introduction’ to William Shakespeare, *Othello*, rev. ed., ed. E. A. J. Honigmann (London, 2016), p. 90, where she discusses Adrian Lester’s approach to playing the title role.

<sup>17</sup> See also Hugh Butts, who opens discussion on racial trauma in the twenty-first century in his article entitled ‘The Black mask of humanity: racial/ethnic discrimination and post-traumatic stress disorder’, *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law* 30 (2002), 336–9, in which he emphasizes the problematic tendency of European Americans to cleave to myths and stereotypes about people from the African diaspora (p. 336).

<sup>18</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1994).

<sup>19</sup> See Kim Hall’s ‘Introduction’ to Kim F. Hall, ed., *Othello, the Moor of Venice: Texts and Contexts* (Boston, MA, 2007), where she discusses ‘Stories of race and place’ (pp. 2–10).

<sup>20</sup> Ben Okri, *A Way of Being Free* (London, 2015), p. 63. See Thompson’s discussion of Okri in her ‘Introduction’ to *Othello*, ed. Honigmann (pp. 63–4). Please note that, hereafter, when discussing the *Othello* Arden edition with Thompson’s ‘Introduction’, I will refer to it as *Othello Arden Revised*.

<sup>21</sup> Edward Pechter’s 2004 edition (New York and London) discourses upon the problematic discussions of Othello’s Blackness, particularly in its performance history, by scholars on both sides of the pond (p. 173). In his 2006 Oxford edition of Shakespeare’s play, Michael Neill discusses the vexed and contradictory audience responses to Blackness or ‘colour’ in the early modern performances (p. 2). Leah Marcus observes the danger of Othello’s Blackness and its proximity to others in her book *How Shakespeare Became Colonial: Editorial Traditions and the British Empire* (London, 2017), pp. 19, 43. While Katharine Eisaman Maus examines some issues of psychology, she emphasizes the legal aspects of proof and consequences in her book *Inwardness and the Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago and London, 1995). Virginia Mason Vaughan’s *Othello* yields rigorous discussion on the concept of the early modern cultural understanding of ‘Moor’ (Vaughan, *Performing Blackness on English Stages, 1500–1800* (Cambridge, 2005) p. 5), while Ian Smith’s discussion, in his article ‘We are Othello: speaking of race in early modern studies’ (*Shakespeare Quarterly* 67 (2016), 104–24), engages in this notion that investigates the critical and cultural conversations around this tragic figure.

<sup>22</sup> This question possesses not only legal echoes, but historical ones. See *The Destruction of Black Civilization: Great Issues of a Race from 4500 B.C. to 2000 A.D.* (Chicago, 1987) by

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entire scene unfolds like a courtroom where the court disposes of multiple matters. Before the entrance of Othello and Brabantio, the Senate deals with the matter of the Ottomans, Cyprus and the imminent attack which poses a threat to Venice. At the temporary close of this issue, this body turns its attention to the matter of *Senator Brabantio of Venice* versus *General Othello the Moor*. Here, Shakespeare offers the audience a scene that we do not receive in Giraldi Cinthio’s source novella, *Hecatommithi* (1565). Briefly, Cinthio mentions the reluctance of Desdemona’s family regarding the marriage between her and the Moor, writing: ‘Although the Lady’s relatives did all they could to make her take another husband, they were united in marriage’ (p. 376). Instead, Shakespeare presents what in 21st-century nomenclature would be considered a high-profile political case that appears to read as a domestic civil case. Amidst the political and domestic dynamics, Othello must develop a legal theory of defence to address Brabantio’s accusations.<sup>23</sup> The accused has two options for his defence: (1) deny those facts (or one of them) as explained by the plaintiff, here Brabantio; or (2) admit those facts and demonstrate that the plaintiff is not entitled to succeed.<sup>24</sup>

In response to the Duke’s inquiry, Brabantio explains to the court how Othello the Moor with some mysterious dark arts, ‘by spells and medicines bought of mountebanks’ (1.3.62), has pilfered his honourable and cherished daughter Desdemona from the safety of his protection and household. In this scene, Brabantio, like Iago throughout this drama, plays upon the stereotypes about Africanness. Several scholars proffer explanations to illuminate these stereotypes. ‘The African figure’, Mudimbe writes, ‘was an empirical fact, yet by definition it was perceived, experienced, and promoted as the sign of the absolute otherness’ (p. 38). ‘Racial otherness allows white man to lump all ‘others’ (male and female) into another, less valued, group’ (Hall 182). This concept of otherness rests upon the institutional foundation of colonialism or colonization, which derives from the Latin meaning, ‘to cultivate’ or ‘to design’ (Mudimbe 1). This design or cultivation of Africa

prefaces ‘depopulation’ using violence and genocide by the colonizers.<sup>25</sup> In *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in America*, Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields explain:<sup>26</sup>

A colonial rule does not just want the natives to bow down and render obeisance to their new sovereign. The natives must also grow food, pay taxes, go to work in mines and on estates, provide conscripts for the army and help to hold the line against rival powers. In effect, the colonizers and natives negotiate a ‘social terrain’, which maps the boundaries of the relationship and if the terrain changes, so must their activities and the map.

In early modern Italy, most representations of Africans depicted them as either enslaved or formerly enslaved.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps, to understand these dynamics and their history, we should ask – as previous legal scholars such as Derrick Bell have – ‘How does the human spirit accommodate itself to desolation? How did they? What tools of the spirit were in their hands with which to cut a path through the wilderness of their despair?’<sup>28</sup> Do the answers provide the secrets to survival of racial

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Chancellor Williams, where he asks: ‘what had happened? How was this highly advanced Black Civilization so completely destroyed that its people for our times and for some centuries past have found themselves not only behind the other peoples of the world, but as well, the color of their skin a sign of inferiority, bad luck, and the badge of the slave whether bond or free?’ (p. 18). See also Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*. Trouillot applies the interrogatory – ‘what happened’ – to how we perceive the concept of ‘history’ (p. 2).

<sup>23</sup> See also Mitchell N. Berman, ‘Justification and excuse, law and morality’, *Duke Law Journal* 5 (2003), 1–77. This article addresses some of the legal theories of defence, which not only are used during a trial, but may also be used by courts for instructing juries.

<sup>24</sup> J. H. Baker, *An Introduction to English Legal History*, 3rd ed. (London and Boston, MA, 2004), p. 91.

<sup>25</sup> Sven Lindqvist examines the nineteenth century in his book *Exterminate All the Brutes*, trans. Joan Tate (London, 1997), pp. 122–3. See also Raoul Peck’s HBO documentary *Exterminate All the Brutes* (2021).

<sup>26</sup> Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in America* (London, 2012), pp. 139–40.

<sup>27</sup> See T. F. Earle and K. J. P. Lowe, *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 282.

<sup>28</sup> Derrick Bell discusses how to decolonize the mind, and Dr Howard Thurman’s questions, in his book *And We Are*

oppression passed from the humanity of African ancestors (p. 217)?

These multiple lenses – legal, medical and racial – provide additional ways of reading this scene before the Senate in this matter of *Brabantio* versus *Othello*. For example, let us not forget how Brabantio threatens Othello with ‘peril’ (1.2.81) and ‘prison’ (1.2.85) at 1.2 before arriving at the Senate. After having been exposed to dangerous and deadly stressors, ‘what are the impacts of generations of slavery and oppression on a – people?’<sup>29</sup> First, what are the effects of slavery and oppression for Othello? Whether Othello with his words seems undaunted by the threat made before witnesses – particularly, one of his men, Iago – is not definitive. Second, the very important fact here is that Brabantio has threatened the life of Othello and seeks the law to help him to carry out his threat. In essence, he seeks to weaponize the law for his personal benefit. In answering these questions, an examination of the speech that Othello makes before the Venetian Senate, which I address later, is quite instructive.

Even more compelling is the *effect* of the text on Othello – the commentary that Keith Anthony Cobb presents in his play *American Moor* complements the analysis of the words from the perspective of an actor grounded within the African diaspora and playing this pivotal role. Cobb’s play presents the audience at least two opposing mentalities – confidence, and crippling fear and foreboding – which Othello embodies: ‘Othello enters that scene like I just entered this dingy-ass, empty, cold motherfucking’ room, under scrutiny, his boyhood dreams now unrealizable, those of adulthood clearly in jeopardy, and immediately aware that who he *is* is not the *he* either sought or seen by those he stands before’ (p. 37). With both fear and fearlessness, Othello, according to Cobb, confronts Brabantio and the Senate. Faced with Brabantio’s vengeful outrage, General Othello enters the Venetian Senate and is presented with a quandary: does he share his intimate thoughts with these stately men? Othello the Moor is always cognizant of his minoritized position, yet he must place, even temporarily, his

consternation aside and unpack the depth of his humanity with this political body:

In his heart, he is an invincible, indestructible powerhouse of a boy, with a deep, boyish desire to please, to be praised, to make people proud of him . . . he shouts from the shore from the bottom of his voice to the top of his mighty lungs so as they hear him back across the Strait of Gibraltar, in Morocco, Mauritania and back through the ages of his people’s glorious past, ‘Have I not done well? Am I not wonderful just as you?’ (p. 37)

Within this space, past and present oscillate for Othello.<sup>30</sup> He calls on his ancestors, and seeks their approval and their strength. With this ancestral power accompanying Othello, will these senators and the Duke see the wonder of Othello the Moor, or his many accomplishments? ‘*This* is what stands before that senate, his human being seeping out of every pore. And I suspect that among them they would say, because I have heard them say it of me, with words and without, “Where does he get his balls so big to act like *everything* that he is?”’ (p. 37).

I think Cobb’s question is answered by the ancestral power, which exudes from Othello the Moor – this general presents himself as the epitome of leadership, honour, fidelity and strength. At the same time, we find the problematic word ‘resilience’ seems relevant, but ever more powerful is an unabating and immovable hope planted by his African ancestors. At the same time, he also describes another feeling – less confident and grandiose: ‘in all those other once so impregnable places not quite head and not quite heart of a body begun

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*Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice* (New York, 1989), pp. 215–31.

<sup>29</sup> Dr Joy DeGruy, in her book *Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America’s Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (Milwaukie, OR, 2005), asks this question. Using the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders V*, she describes the criterion A stressor for PTSD, stating ‘the person was exposed to: death, threatened death, actual or threatened serious injury, or actual threatened sexual violence either directly, as a witness, indirectly, or repeated or extreme indirect exposure to aversive details of the event(s)’ (pp. 101–2).

<sup>30</sup> See also Toni Morrison’s *Desdemona*, lyrics by Rokia Traoré, Oberon Modern Plays (London, 2012).

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to betray him, he knows he is old . . . He knows he is epileptic . . . He knows by now that no one is going to erect a statute on the Rialto to the memory of the great General Othello, the Moor’ (p. 37). The actor, Keith Anthony Cobb, describes a level of introspection and transparency to reveal this character, Othello, that shifts focus from physical to medical impediments. Even further, this description uncovers, through a series of rhetorical questions, Othello’s vulnerable mental faculties:

What did you call his situation, ‘dire’? He smiles, compensating for despair that you have no clue, nor the first genuine concern what is, in fact, dire about his situation. His smile is like an involuntary spasm on the edge of insanity. How does one maintain one’s sanity when so much of what one is has forever been held in such strict and unnecessary abeyance by others’ fears and the rules that one never agreed to? You want mental fragility, all the tiny little cracks in Othello’s armor that might make him finally snap completely and kill someone, even if that someone were the solitary love of his life?

(pp. 37–8)

In this moment amidst all these complicated emotions of fear, fragility and violence, Othello presents his theory of defence to Brabantio’s allegations that refutes his father-in-law’s slanderous remarks before the Senate. He embraces, assents to and raises the stakes of the judicial body’s judgment. Yet, problematically, this space does not embody a place for truth and justice, but one where – in order to defeat this threat to his life, liberty and humanity – Othello must re-enact his life-long history of trauma. He understands that the only way the Senate will displace the evil depiction that Brabantio’s allegations have created is for him to perform, re-enact, the painful trauma that has heretofore hastened his arrival in Venice. Before General Othello enters this space, he realizes his worth to the Senate as a warrior to defeat the Turks and save Venice, for he knows his ‘services . . . shall out-tongue [Brabantio’s] complaints’ (1.2.17–18). Nevertheless, this factor does not mean he does not experience the fallout from revisiting the trauma, ‘on the edge of sanity’ (p. 38), which he must enact again and again to justify his presence, liberty and purpose.

Within this Venetian court, Othello embarks upon what Cathy Caruth calls ‘an unconscious historical testimony’, creating a site for historical memory and offering ‘notions of what it means to remember’.<sup>31</sup> Yet I submit that, especially for this Venetian court, Othello’s testimony is quite conscious. Michel-Rolph Trouillot suggests that ‘the past is constantly evoked as the starting point of an ongoing trauma and as a necessary explanation to current inequalities suffered by blacks’.<sup>32</sup> The moment demonstrates this ‘ongoing trauma’ when Othello begins with a backstory in the monologue that he presents to the assembly to explain and defend his secret marriage to the Venetian Senator Brabantio’s daughter, Desdemona, and rebutt arguments of a mystical seduction:

OTHELLO Her father loved me, oft invited me,  
Still questioned me the story of my life  
From year to year – the battles, sieges,  
fortunes  
That I have passed.  
I ran it through, even from my boyish days  
To th’ very moment that he bade me tell it,  
Wherein I spake of most disastrous chances,  
Of moving accidents by flood and field,  
Of hair-breadth scapes i’th’ imminent deadly  
breach

(1.3.129–38)

The performance of this narrative reads with multiple layers of complications. As outlined above, while Othello shares his love story, most conspicuously he reveals that Senator Brabantio invited him as a guest into his home. Othello is not, as Brabantio depicts, a thief or an interloper. The general’s narrative tells how the hospitality moves from his being a dinner guest to being a trusted friend, and, eventually and predictably, to a noble suitor. At the same time, this stately locale creates

<sup>31</sup> See Cathy Caruth, *Listening to Trauma: Conversations with Leaders in the Theory and Treatment of Catastrophic Experience* (Baltimore, 2014), p. xiii.

<sup>32</sup> See Trouillot’s discussion in *Silencing the Past*, p. 17, which also extends to the African diaspora.

what resembles a legal trial after his interrogation by Brabantio from the earlier scene. Desdemona's father, Brabantio, invites Othello to share 'the story of [his] life / From year to year' (1.3.130–1). Othello the Moor begins this narrative from his 'boyish days' (1.3.133) until the present day. This character hearkens back to his stage predecessor, Aaron the Moor, a 'combat survivor and prisoner of war and victim of slavery' in *Titus Andronicus*,<sup>33</sup> and simultaneously speaks to a 21st-century child soldier, Agu, navigating violence in a war-torn, fictional West African country in Uzodinma Iweala's novel *Beasts of No Nation*.<sup>34</sup>

In a hostile setting, Othello shares the tales of his victories, particularly those 'battles, sieges, fortunes', through 'epithets of war' (1.1.13), 'the trade of war' (1.2.1) and shifts from the 'most disastrous chances / Of moving accidents by flood and field' (1.3.135–6) with natural catastrophes to the most deadly ones. These embattled phrases evoke for me the figure of the playwright Terence who is depicted in an image, entitled, 'Terence exchanging his comedies for freedom'.<sup>35</sup> Using his own tragic memories, Othello also exchanges an autobiography filled with the 'flinty steel couch of war' (1.3.230) not only for the entertainment of Brabantio and the audience, but for his liberty as well. Othello tells:

Of being taken by the insolent foe  
And sold to slavery; of my redemption thence  
And portance in my travailous history;  
Wherein of antres vast and deserts idle,  
Rough quarries, rocks and hills whose heads  
touch heaven  
(1.3.139–43)

He presents the audience two tales – one elicits the 'romance' of war, and the other lays bare its soul-crushing trauma. Within this journey, we learn from Othello that he was not always the leader of men on the battlefield, nor on the seas, but he was taken captive by the enemy 'and sold to slavery' (1.3.139). Again, we can connect his autobiography/testimony to those shared about Terence, by way of Suetonius – emphasizing the rise from slavery to affluence – and Petrarch – distinguishing

himself from Terence the senator.<sup>36</sup> Othello describes an epoch that is difficult – emotionally and geographically, which evokes Raoul Peck's visually stunning portrayal of the geography of genocide, the suffering in slavery, and the tumult of trauma in his 2021 HBO four-part documentary *Exterminate All the Brutes*.<sup>37</sup> The story explains a global and historical phenomenon, including the little boy from Haiti who determined to narrate this story. Instead of Peck's 'Everyman' who stands in place of the white colonizer, here, we have, in Shakespeare, Othello the Moor, who stands in place of the indigenous colonized. While he does not share the specific circumstances of his own slavery, nor the details of his redemption, Othello refers to this chapter in his narrative as his 'travailous history' (1.3.140). From vast caves and deserts, he navigates rough terrains filled with quarries, rocks and hills of tremendous heights whose peaks 'touch heaven' (1.3.142). Othello faces the demands found from man as well: 'It was my hint to speak – such was my process' (1.3.143). In his travels, he discovers vast representations of culture, behaviour and violence – which also brings us into remembrance of Shakespeare's Caliban and his relentless servitude in *The Tempest*.<sup>38</sup> Peck's documentary and Shakespeare's drama through Caliban examine the nature of oppression and supremacy and how it is perceived by the indigenous populations and colonizers, and essentially exposes the

<sup>33</sup> Deborah Willis, 'Gnawing vulture, revenge, trauma theory, and Titus', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 53 (Spring 2002), 21–52; p. 25.

<sup>34</sup> Uzodinma Iweala, *Beasts of No Nation* (New York, 2005). See also Morrison's reference to Othello as a child soldier in her re-imagining of Shakespeare's play, *Desdemona* (p. 36).

<sup>35</sup> Misha Teramura, 'Black comedy: Shakespeare, Terence, and Titus Andronicus', *ELH* 85 (Winter 2018), 877–908; p. 887.

<sup>36</sup> Teramura, 'Black comedy', p. 881.

<sup>37</sup> See Lindqvist, *Exterminate All the Brutes*.

<sup>38</sup> See also Hortense Spillers's reference to Caliban as he echoes in the works of Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*, Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and Mannoni's *Psychology of Colonialism (Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture)* (Chicago and London, 2003), p. 577, n. 10).



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binaries of slavery and capitalism which exist within this society of exploration, and which Shakespeare portrays through his plays, such as *Othello*. Peck ‘describes a different representation of the indigenous figure’. In her review, Jo Livingstone observed: ‘In it, [Peck] lays out the history of race-based violence as defined by post-colonial scholars of history, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Frantz Fanon, who have worked to dismantle the myths (the white man’s burden, manifest destiny, Aryanism, et al) that disguise whiteness as “natural” or a default state of being.’<sup>39</sup> In the same way that Raoul Peck presents those binaries in his documentary, we see them evoked not only in the legal dynamics before the Venetian Senate and the Duke, but over the course of the play as well.

Within this drama, Shakespeare provides us with this kind of figure in *Othello*, who teeters on the edges of this popular imagery across five acts. As the chronicle of his life continues, *Othello* yields a testimony that seeks to persuade the Venetian court in a way that contravenes social history: ‘They do not tell us just what such a study would look like, and why centuries of testimony by people of color regarding their experiences, including individuals like Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, Charles Wright and Toni Morrison, are not measure enough.’<sup>40</sup> The effect of testimony can unfold as creating a historical narrative, empathy, or trauma pornography. In contravention to lived experience, here in this play, *Othello* weaves a tale that not only persuaded *Desdemona* but attempts to convince the state’s highest officials:

This to hear  
Would *Desdemona* seriously incline,  
But still the house affairs would draw her thence,  
Which ever as she could with haste dispatch  
She’d come again, and with a greedy ear  
Devour up my discourse; which I, observing,  
Took once a pliant hour and found good means  
To draw from her a prayer of earnest heart  
That I would all my pilgrimage dilate,  
Whereof by parcels she had something heard  
But not intently. I did consent,

And often did beguile her of her tears  
When I did speak of some distressful stroke  
That my youth suffered.

(1.3.143–56)

Does his story echo the more recent songs of ‘ongoing trauma’ from figures such as Lucy Terry Prince, whose story is detailed by Nafissa Thompson-Spires in *Four Hundred Souls*<sup>41</sup> or even the traumatic lyrics crafted by Rokya Traoré in Morrison’s *Desdemona*? For General *Othello* the Moor, the anecdotes from his life took a turn when his audience changed from Brabantio to his daughter, *Desdemona*. He was moved by her desire to hear his story and often would expand this discourse on his ‘pilgrimage’ (1.3.154). Seducing tears from *Desdemona*, *Othello* could not ignore the emotional impact of his words for ‘some distressful stroke / That my youth suffered’ (1.3.155–6). By presenting impending war as a backdrop in the play, *Othello*’s war trauma appears accessible, but ‘slavery yielded stressors that were both disturbing and traumatic, exacting a wound upon the African American psyche that continues to fester.’<sup>42</sup> Yet most of the African diaspora experienced these psychic wounds, including *Othello*. Even in this 21st-century moment, we have ‘ocular proof’ (3.3.363) of slavery, in the case of Libya, and tepid global responses to that tangible evidence.<sup>43</sup> This proof is ‘the strongest kind of evidence in both English and Continental courts.’<sup>44</sup> How does the audience beyond the Venetian assembly respond to *Othello*’s wounds?

<sup>39</sup> Jo Livingstone, ‘Raoul Peck’s *Exterminate All the Brutes* insists on telling what really happened’, *The New Republic*, 16 April 2021.

<sup>40</sup> Bell, *And We Are Not Saved*, p. 81.

<sup>41</sup> Nafissa Thompson-Spires, ‘Lucy Terry Prince, 1744–1749’, in *Four Hundred Souls*, ed. Ibram X. Kendi and Keisha N. Blain (New York, 2021), p. 117.

<sup>42</sup> De Gruy, *Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, p. 101.

<sup>43</sup> Patrick Wintour, ‘Fake news: Libya seizes on Trump tweet to discredit CNN slavery report’, *The Guardian*, 28 November 2017.

<sup>44</sup> Maus, *Inwardness and the Theater*, p. 118.

Arguably, the playwright, the patient or the speaker wants the audience's, the doctor's and the listener's empathy. Some studies of trauma refer to 'empathy' as 'an undeniable miracle', along with 'love', in response to experienced trauma.<sup>45</sup> Even Desdemona could not quell the empathetic effect of Othello's annals upon her:

My story being done  
 She gave me for my pains a world of sighs,  
 She swore in faith 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange,  
 'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful;  
 She wished she had not heard it, yet she wished  
 That heaven had made her such a man. She thanked me  
 And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,  
 I should but teach him how to tell my story  
 And that would woo her.

(1.3.159–67)

In the sharing of his own journey to Venice, Othello found that Desdemona's response was not merely 'passing strange' and 'wondrous pitiful', but she was open to being wooed by this Moor – she knew him and loved every detail of his life. She does not surrender mere empathy, but something perhaps more significant – that is, humanity. The fight against Brabantio's unadulterated rage, supremacy and oppression relies upon humanity. In this trial or hearing, does Othello's recitation of his life history and his history with Desdemona recover the humanity that earlier scenes with Brabantio, Iago and Roderigo attempt to destroy?<sup>46</sup>

Clearly, this shift in Othello's story from the autobiographical slave narrative to a Venetian romance should not be overlooked. It is the slave narrative that consumes Brabantio. It is the slave narrative that captures the imagination of the attendees in the audience. It is the slave narrative that finances the global voyages to begin the racial capitalism that builds nations. The shift to the romantic disturbs Brabantio. The shift to the romantic disturbs some attendees, based on their 'hostile' reception to Ira Aldridge's performance of Othello.<sup>47</sup> The distaste for the shift to the romantic serves as the

basis for anti-miscegenation laws not only in the United States but across the African diaspora.<sup>48</sup> Othello's response was swift and life-altering:

Upon this hint I spake:  
 She loved me for the dangers I had passed,  
 And I loved her that she did pity them.  
 This only is the witchcraft I have used

(1.3.165–8)

Here, we have a report on his childhood, a history of battle, and his courtship of Desdemona. In a seemingly therapeutic and socially engaging way, Othello retells the traumas of war, violence, capture and enslavement. Does Othello share this story in a safe space, amongst confidants, allies and loved ones? Will we see that, after the telling of his story, he has won the day with this audience that possesses ulterior motives? Notably, Othello possesses a very special skill set that is needed to maintain the safety of the Venetians – is he only truly imperilled after he is no longer needed to secure the state's physical and economic safety? What is the cumulative effect of dismissing, ignoring or refusing to engage substantively with the story of Othello? Yet this drama does not limit the engagement with this narrative through Iago's soliloquies, but also stages the re-enactment of battle with the 'clink and fall of swords' (2.3.230) in the fight scenes between Othello's lieutenant, Cassio, and the former governor of Cyprus, Montano, in this 'town of war' (2.3.209) at 2.3. In the following section, we will examine how Iago's soliloquies and monologues instigate Othello's continued trauma, through what might be called Othello's

<sup>45</sup> For discussion on why more than empathy is needed, see Françoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillière, *History beyond Trauma* (New York, 2004), p. 59.

<sup>46</sup> See Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham and London, 2016), p. 55.

<sup>47</sup> See Ayanna Thompson's Introduction to *Othello Arden Revised*, p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> See discussion of miscegenation in Leah S. Marcus, 'The two texts of "Othello" and early modern constructions of race', in *Textual Performances: The Modern Reproduction of Shakespeare's Drama*, ed. Lukas Erne and Margaret Jane Kidnie (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 24–5.

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own post-traumatic distress disorder, to demonstrate how white supremacy requires consistent instigation of racial trauma.<sup>49</sup>

It is this constant demand to justify himself that brings to mind a statement by Toni Morrison:

The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language, and you spend twenty years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn’t shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says you have no art, so you dredge that up. Somebody says you have no kingdoms, so you dredge that up. None of this is necessary. There will always be one more thing.<sup>50</sup>

In spite of its effect on the community of the African diaspora, what occurs within social structure, or publicly, is distraction, trauma and an attempt to redirect one’s energy. For example, here, instead of preparing for the upcoming battle against the Turks, Othello is justifying how he was successfully able to court Desdemona when others, including Roderigo, failed. It has long been recognized as a devastatingly harmful pattern. It is harmful to the African diaspora, and it is harmful to the larger community, for, by demanding participation in the pointless justification of one’s existence, success, station and presence in white spaces, everyone participates in a futile process that does not address the larger problem of the unacceptability with blackness in any space.

Othello’s presentation of his lifelong trauma wrapped in a love story serves to fight injustice and move the Senate to sympathy against the rash and defamatory statements levelled at him by Brabantio, his wife’s father. His narrative dispels the gaps, the inconsistencies and the unsubstantiated story that Brabantio creates to fell Othello. At the end of the arguments, Brabantio’s case evolves as outlandish in its execution and racist at its foundation. While I will address Iago’s motivations later, I examine not only Othello’s motives here, but, more importantly, Brabantio’s motives within this scene.

Eventually, the Duke and the Senate are persuaded by the account of Othello and its

responsiveness to Brabantio’s allegations. What is the verdict that the Senate should reach after hearing both Brabantio’s and Othello’s accounts of this matter? The Senate has every reason to move against Brabantio, who did not bother to come to the Senate about the matter of the Turks, and to favour Othello who would help to see them resolve this military matter. In addition, General Othello is reputed as not only a capable warrior, but an honourable one. The Duke refers to the general as ‘Valiant Othello’ (1.3.49), but Senator 1 even more conspicuously calls him the ‘valiant Moor’ (1.3.48). This assembly has no reason to doubt the word of Othello – and they may have, based on previous interaction with Brabantio, reason to doubt his word. Here, Brabantio’s allegations appear grounded not only in false claims of witchcraft and potions, but – more subtly – race and economics. To Brabantio’s arguments, the Duke replies: ‘To vouch this is no proof (1.3.107). Is it possible that the issue becomes one of integrity, where Othello possesses a great measure and Brabantio’s measure has been placed in question, particularly based on his performance before the Senate?

In sum, Othello’s legal defence here emerges as successful against Brabantio’s half-baked concoctions based in fiction, falsehoods and propaganda. At the end of this scene, rather than a celebratory tone after Othello wins the day, there is a sense of foreboding–foreshadowing. His father-in-law not only has placed (verbally) poison into his ear regarding Desdemona, but has in essence disowned her because she has confirmed Othello’s story before the Senate. Brabantio’s position is disturbingly disappointing and more complicated than it would appear:

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<sup>49</sup> Della Mosley, Candice N. Hargons, Carolyn Meiller *et al.*, ‘Critical consciousness of anti-Black racism’, *Journal of Counseling Psychology* (2021), 1–16.

<sup>50</sup> Toni Morrison, ‘A humanist view’, Oregon’s Public Speakers Collection, Black Studies Center Public Dialogue, Part 2, 30 May 1975, Portland State University Library, Portland, Oregon. Keynote Speech.

Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see:  
She has deceived her father, and may thee.

(1.3.293–4)

He is not just a father who has had ‘property’, in terms of his daughter, taken without his permission, but a man who has determined for less honourable reasons to disown his daughter and his new son-in-law because of the latter’s blackness. Ironically, Desdemona and Othello both know what it is to be propertied – based on gender and race.<sup>51</sup>

#### EXAMINING IAGO’S CONSPIRACY

As I confess it is my nature’s plague / To spy into abuses,  
and oft my jealousy / Shapes faults that are not.

(*Iago*, 3.3.149–51)

In this examination of legal spaces, 1.1 presents a setting outside that of the courtroom hearing. Seemingly more truthful than a soliloquy, the following monologue exposes the oppressive machinations that occur away from public spaces.<sup>52</sup> With almost every sense, we, the audience, see, hear and feel Iago’s animus that surpasses petty jealousy. In essence, the conversation, which we encounter between Iago and Roderigo at the outset of the play, presents two co-conspirators who determine to destroy Othello the Moor by any means necessary. For the purpose of this discussion, I define the concept of conspiracy as an ‘agreement between two parties, who develop a partnership to commit some illegal act, and that has divided families, friends, and countrymen and women, as history and literature have proven’.<sup>53</sup>

While the nature of the underlying crime varies, the crime of conspiracy, its elements, its case law and its statutory prohibitions continue to evolve from its early fourteenth-century origins.<sup>54</sup> For example, Iago suggests an alternate scheme to Roderigo where Iago ‘trimmed in forms and visages of duty’, by ‘keep[ing] yet their hearts attending on themselves’, increases his economic and sociopolitical circumstances by ‘throwing but shows of service on their lords’ (1.1.49–51).

Although there exists an irrationality to the social construction of race if separated from its agenda of racial capitalism, by considering both racism and capitalism together, we provide a more effective institutional analysis of supremacy and oppression and how they manifest – for example, in unlawful behaviour.<sup>55</sup>

While some might argue that Cassius manoeuvred within a similar ethos when he served Julius Caesar, for Cassius the motive was power – Iago’s motives emerge as more complex and sinister. Nevertheless, the final part of this speech delivers the violent rhetoric that defines Iago’s commitment to his notions of supremacy: his ‘nature’s plague’ and his ‘jealousy’. Iago divulges two key facts in this portion of the speech: (1) ‘In following [the Moor] I follow but myself’; and (2) ‘I am not what I am’ (1.1.57, 64). Iago articulates an intentional plan to wage a multi-tiered warfare against an unsuspecting Othello. This speech embodies the angry white male syndrome to supplant and

<sup>51</sup> See also Lisa M. Barksdale-Shaw, “‘Did not great Julius bleed for justice’ sake?”: examining a theory of social justice through will-making in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 33 (2020), pp. 74–87 (n. 25).

<sup>52</sup> Recall the 2009 Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, which was signed into law by President Barack Obama on 28 October 2009. See also Tariro Mzezewa, ‘Regardless of the verdict, Arbury murder suspects still face federal hate-crime charges’, *New York Times*, 23 November 2021.

<sup>53</sup> See Lisa Barksdale-Shaw, “‘That you are both decipher’d’: revealing espionage and staging written evidence in early modern England”, in *A Material History of Medieval and Early Modern Ciphers: Cryptography and the History of Literacy*, ed. Katherine Ellison and Susan Kim (New York and London, 2018), pp. 118–36.

<sup>54</sup> See also Baker’s discussion on intimidation and conspiracy (*An Introduction to English Legal History*, pp. 523–9).

<sup>55</sup> Cedric J. Robinson, *Cedric J. Robinson: On Racial Capitalism, Black Internationalism, and Cultures of Resistance*, ed. H. L. T. Quan (London, 2019). He writes ‘Only the clever manipulation of the threat of black dominance has kept the underprivileged white masses and the privileged upper classes of the South from coming to a parting of the political ways’ (p. 177). See his discussion of studying racism and capitalism together (p. 77).

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destroy his target.<sup>56</sup> Here, the target is Othello, his superior – not a head of state, as in *Julius Caesar*. It begs the questions: ‘Why is the white man so angry? Why is he being so careless about the impact of his anger? Why doesn’t he notice the effect this outburst is having on the few people of color in the room?’<sup>57</sup> Is the issue for Iago truly hatred? Nevertheless, Iago’s actions serve as proxy for treason against Venice, which hired General Othello to safeguard its nation state.<sup>58</sup> Iago seeks to topple Othello, not merely for the purse that Roderigo supplies, but for his own dissatisfaction and reasons that bear no proof in the action on the stage. Not unlike the Duke of Venice’s protestations for proof of Brabantio’s allegations about Othello’s witchcraft: ‘Without more certain and more overt test / Than these thin habits and poor likelihoods / Of modern seeming do prefer against him’ (I.I.108–10). In the same way, Iago has no rational bases upon which to ground his hatred, his enmity, his detestation, his ill will and malevolence.

Typically, the motives of this conspiracy are not jealousy, but something much more insidious. Iago evolves as the vehicle whereby racial oppression, antagonism and decimation run throughout the drama. By colonizing the political against those who are marginalized by race, he wages a war against Othello, which results in a devastating attack at the very core of his person – his personal life and his career.<sup>59</sup> We should not overlook, underestimate or dismiss the use of white supremacy – to do so would encourage reading this scene and the entire play without the extremely nuanced gradations that Shakespeare provides, intentionally or not, in this complicated play centring General Othello the Moor of Venice. From Samuel Coleridge to Kyle Grady, an examination of Iago’s motives entails a long history in literary scholarship.<sup>60</sup> Yet, in this analysis, we examine motivation through legal, psychological and racial lenses that reveal more than poetic licence: sinister and malevolent implications, which possess real-life consequences.<sup>61</sup>

Within this play, Iago introduces an ideological framework that exists during this early modern moment. Race and racecraft emerge as a global project of colonialism, imperialism and capitalism, which essentially devastates every continent.<sup>62</sup> The need for African bodies to serve capitalist projects on a global scale becomes prescient and sufficient to alienate and dehumanize. With the Spanish Inquisition and the discovery doctrine, this ideology spreads in methods from every institution – religious, social, financial and political.<sup>63</sup>

The mythology of the superiority of whiteness remains foundational as the antithesis to recognizing

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<sup>56</sup> See Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (New York and London, 2017). She observes that ‘Republican South Carolina senator Lindsey Graham, taking stock of the nearly inevitable apocalypse, put it best: “We’re not generating enough angry white guys to stay in business for the long term”’ (p. 139).

<sup>57</sup> Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (Boston, MA, 2018), p. 1.

<sup>58</sup> See Rebecca Lemon, *Treason by Words: Literature, Law, and Rebellion in Shakespeare’s England* (Ithaca and London, 2006). Consider her discussion of the 1534 Treason Act (p. 8).

<sup>59</sup> For discussion of decolonizing the political, see Mahmood Mamdani, *Neither Settler nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 2020), p. 23.

<sup>60</sup> See Elinor S. Shaffer, ‘Iago’s malignity motivated: Coleridge’s unpublished “Opus Magnum”’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 19 (1968), 196; Kyle Grady, ‘Othello, Colin Powell, and post-racial anachronism’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 67 (2016), 68–83; p. 68; Harold Bloom, *Iago* (New York, 1992), p. 3; Matt Carter, ‘Othello’s white sword: stage properties, race, and performance’, *Shakespeare Bulletin* 38 (2020), 245.

<sup>61</sup> See Karen Attiah, ‘Opinion: George Floyd has become the Emmett Till of this moment’, *The Washington Post*, 6 June 2020.

<sup>62</sup> Peter Fitzpatrick, ‘Racism and the innocence of law’, *Journal of Law and Society* 14 (Spring 1987).

<sup>63</sup> See Chouki El Hamel, *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 12, 55, 78, 99. See also Peter Fitzpatrick, ‘Document of discovery’, in *A Companion to Racial and Ethnic Studies* (Oxford, 2001). For a discussion of different conditions of genocide, see Raoul Peck’s ‘Exterminate All the Brutes’, where he includes contempt for aliens, fanaticism, exploitation, slavery, and conquest.

a collective humanity.<sup>64</sup> While the presentation of Othello's story – including his history, his romance with Desdemona, and his status as a general – would appear to yield a powerful way to centre the protagonist of this tragedy, what unfolds becomes the reification of a dominant narrative that is crafted from the outset of the play until the five acts reach their conclusion. In the two passages that I discuss below, the dominant narrative of superiority offers stunning models for dismantling Othello's psyche and marginalize him before his men and the Venetian society. Specifically, Iago, Othello's ensign, embarks upon a character assassination unequalled in all the fields of battle, to belie Othello's reputed valiant reputation. Through racial epithets, racialized metaphors and hatred, 'good Iago' (2.1.97) manages, for several purses from Desdemona's rejected suitor Roderigo, to create a breach between Desdemona and Othello and mount an assault against the 'wronged Othello' (3.3.470) that sends him on an emotional, legal and political descent from which he will not recover. Iago not only weaponizes the tools of this descent, but emerges as Othello's 'false friend'.

As an unabashed proclamation, Iago simply states: 'I am not what I am' (1.1.64). He explains his plan to Roderigo. This plan involves him offering a perception of himself that is false. Iago is the dangerous figure in the play, but through propaganda, psychological warfare and slander, he marshals a diabolical assault on Othello that destroys him. We witness an intergenerational transmission of racial trauma from this tale, and those of classical playwright Terence, to the narratives of twentieth-century writers James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison. At every turn, the psyche of the man from the African diaspora endures the attacks from the turmoils of slavery to those of Jim Crow. As he explains to Roderigo, Iago has no idea what ills or misdeeds Othello may have committed, but he declares emphatically and repeatedly: 'I hate the Moor' (1.3.366–7, 385). While Roderigo is aware of the plans against Othello, he does not realize that he will finance this great project to his own economic ruin. I recall a former American president, Lyndon B. Johnson, who said: 'If you can convince the lowest white man he's better than the best colored

man, he won't notice you're picking his pocket. Hell, give him somebody to look down on, and he'll empty his pockets for you.'<sup>65</sup> Iago intimately understands this premise.

Within the criminal project, this conspiracy to fell Othello contains several schemes. Initially, we are introduced to the conspiracy between Iago and Roderigo. In five acts, we watch Iago use several unwitting actors to advance this conspiracy. First, we have the moment in 2.3 where Iago convinces Cassio to talk to Desdemona to assist him in getting Othello to retract the demotion and return his position as Othello's lieutenant.<sup>66</sup> He ultimately wants Cassio to have access to Desdemona, so she seems guilty of having made Othello a cuckold. Second, in 3.3, Iago convinces his wife Emilia to steal the handkerchief, so he might prove Desdemona's infidelity.<sup>67</sup> Third, in 1.1, Iago uses Brabantio to level accusations against Othello to taint his reputation, motives and leadership, and demonstrate that he poses a threat not only to Brabantio's family at the local level, but also to the nation state of Venice.

Rather conspicuously, the attack on Cassio mirrors the concerted attacks on Othello, but these moments are quite distinct – like Desdemona, Cassio serves as a pawn to dismantle Othello. For instance, the attack on Cassio is merely to remove the lieutenant from his position, for it is Iago's belief – or so he says – that the Florentine 'arithmetician' and 'bookish theoretic' (1.1.18, 22) Cassio possesses neither the experience nor the character that leadership demands. Some may suggest that Iago was right, as Cassio indulged in the alcohol-induced revelry with the other men despite his own self-knowledge that he was susceptible to

<sup>64</sup> Laura Quiros, Rani Varghese and Todd Vanidestine, 'Disrupting the single story: challenging the dominant trauma narratives through a critical race lens', *Traumatology* 26 (2020), 160–8.

<sup>65</sup> Bill Moyers, 'What a real president was like', *Washington Post*, 13 November 1968.

<sup>66</sup> See the discussion that begins at line 310.

<sup>67</sup> See the discussion that begins at line 217.

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overdrinking. However, Iago does not rest at Cassio’s alcohol-fuelled binge, but uses the state of intoxication as a moment for Roderigo to launch a physical attack against Cassio to incense Othello against his lieutenant. Yet the attack against Cassio extends further, for, after the lieutenant’s demotion, Iago encourages him to seek restoration of his position through Othello’s wife instead of seeking out Othello directly. This pursuit of Desdemona for his cause makes Cassio look even more egregiously guilty in Othello’s eyes and has the added benefit of making Desdemona look unfaithful as well.

With relentless fervour, Iago also recruits his wife Emilia to implicate Desdemona further by having Emilia pilfer a cherished handkerchief given to Desdemona by Othello. Of all the pawns that Iago chooses in these multiple schemes, Emilia is the one who expresses the greatest distrust of or doubt about his attentions. Or perhaps she is the most sceptical about the sincerity of his intentions? She is never heard referring to her husband as ‘honest Iago’, as Othello does (1.3.295).<sup>68</sup> Actually, her husband impugns her honesty as well. Early in this scene, Iago suggests that Othello has even made him a cuckold with his wife Emilia – sexual jealousy is not separated from race. Iago’s motives appear to return to the propaganda associated with supremacy. Nevertheless, throughout the play, Othello refers to him as ‘honest Iago’, but in the opening scene Iago explains his ideals of supremacy by reinforcing well-crafted narratives of hierarchy, capitalism and confidence tricks:<sup>69</sup>

I follow him to serve my turn upon him.  
We cannot all be masters, nor all masters  
Cannot be truly followed. You shall mark  
Many a duteous and knee-crooking knave  
That, doting on his own obsequious bondage,  
Wears out his time much like his master’s ass  
For naught but provender, and when he’s old,  
cashiered.  
Whip me such honest knaves!

(1.1.41–8)

In these lines, Iago provides a persuasive diatribe to Roderigo in an attempt to dispel the notion that

duty is rewarded. In fact, he argues that blindly following one’s prescribed duties results in ruin. Maybe the character Bosola from John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* might agree after serving two years in the ‘galleys’ (1.1.34) because he followed the bidding of his masters. In Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, Cassius delivers a similar speech at 1.2 to convince Brutus to join the conspiracy against Caesar. Apparently, Emilia knows something about her husband that the rest of the characters do not. Nevertheless, she gives the handkerchief to him despite her concerns. Is Iago so convincing and intimidating, or is she merely the obedient wife? Ultimately, Iago’s placement of Desdemona’s handkerchief in Cassio’s rooms solidifies the ultimate assassination attempt against Cassio – authorized by Othello, planned by Iago, and executed by Roderigo.

In act 1, Brabantio’s role in this conspiratorial scheme sets off these multitudinous plots against Othello. While Brabantio appears the most vested in the cause against Othello, his arguments also advance more than a fatherly protective stance on behalf of his daughter, Desdemona. It inculcates his notions of supremacy. Even at the end of his case, he advises Othello not to trust his daughter because she has betrayed him.

Finally, Othello becomes the last unwitting partner in his own demise. Several moments unfold – for instance, Iago directs him: ‘Do it not with poison, strangle her in her bed – / even the bed she hath contaminated’ (4.1.204–5). The most devastating part of this conspiracy to destroy Othello the Moor is for Iago to make himself seem the friend, the counsellor and the advisor to Othello. Instead of helping him, Iago’s every utterance advances his plot against Othello. Even when Iago witnesses the trance that Othello slips into at 4.1, he is unfazed by it as he responds: ‘Work on, / My medicine, work!’ (4.1.44–5). He has no sympathy. His sociopathy does not allow him to extend

<sup>68</sup> Othello makes this reference in acts 1, 2 and 5.

<sup>69</sup> Steven Roberts and Michael Rizzo, ‘The psychology of American racism’, *American Psychologist* (2021), 475.

any sense of concern for Othello's mental or physical state when he witnesses this traumatic episode.<sup>70</sup>

Overall, these multiple conspiracies become significant because they are not crafted merely to destroy Othello, demote Cassio, defame Desdemona and discombobulate Brabantio. Most importantly, they are constructed to make Othello become what Iago thinks of him as: unworthy, alien and a monster. 'Monstrous intimacies', whether defined as 'strange', 'violent' or even 'interracial' coupling, encompass the 'original trauma' and 'subsequent repetitions post-slavery'.<sup>71</sup> Iago has proven that he will use any excuse to explain his hatred of Othello the Moor.

#### CREATING A COURT RECORD OF IAGO'S AND RODERIGO'S CRIMES

I swear 'tis better to be much abused / Than but to know't a little.

(*Othello* 3.3.338–9)

Where the 1.3 court scene evolves as Iago's attempt not only to assassinate Othello's character, but also perhaps to instigate an even more deadly result, this final scene of the play accomplishes that goal. Even further, we see what may be read as the prosecution of Othello. In a brief summary, 5.2 opens with Othello approaching his marital bed to murder his wife Desdemona for her alleged unfaithfulness. By line 123, Desdemona expires after Othello strangles her. What proceeds involves an exchange between Emilia and Othello where she defends Desdemona's faithfulness and Othello insists upon his wife's unfaithfulness. Emilia remains steadfast until, eventually, she is violently stabbed by her husband before witnesses at line 231, after a failed attempt by Othello to save her. Immediately, Iago is removed and escorted off stage, and we are left with Othello and a dying Emilia who finally expires at line 249.

Echoing the Duke in 1.2, Gratiano asks the same question: 'What is the matter?' (5.2.257). More importantly, 'what is their crime? And what is to be their punishment?'.<sup>72</sup> Here again, the scene

opens like a courtroom scene where Venetian nobles, Gratiano and Lodovico, Desdemona's kin, pass judgment. Absent are the Duke of Venice and Brabantio. Nevertheless, we have other Venetian nobles to enforce the law, to return order and to assess this macabre tragedy that has unfolded. In brief, Othello confesses all, including the attempted murder of Cassio and the murder of Desdemona. Iago chooses to stand mute. Othello commits suicide.

When comparing the hearing in act 1 with this hearing in act 5, we have conspicuously different types of proofs. 'The law of proof required the (professional) judge of facts to decide on the basis of an objectively fixed quantum of proof – two concurring independent witnesses of good character, or an equivalent combination of proofs.'<sup>73</sup> Whereas, in act 1, Brabantio levels accusations – more accurately, defamation – here, in this final scene, written evidence appears, which reads as relevant, reliable and persuasive. In act 1, the Iago–Roderigo conspiracy was in its infancy, but by act 5, the conspiracy has blossomed into the full manifestation of its goals – to fell Othello. These written, evidentiary proofs in act 5 may be considered in terms of their reliability, credibility and objectivity.<sup>74</sup> In effect, these two hearings illustrate the evolution of the trial process, with the court relying on more substantive evidence.<sup>75</sup> Iago's conspiracy does not reveal jealousy, but an animus

<sup>70</sup> For discussion of Iago's sociopathy, see Burton Raffel's 'Introduction' to *Othello*, *The Annotated Shakespeare* (Connecticut, 2005), p. xxxii.

<sup>71</sup> Sharpe, *In the Wake*, pp. 25, 65, 190.

<sup>72</sup> For further discussions of these questions that circulate around the procession of subjugated African bodies, see Sadiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford, 1997); quotation from p. 32.

<sup>73</sup> Michael R. T. Macnair, *The Law of Proof in Early Modern Equity* (Berlin, 1999), p. 15.

<sup>74</sup> For a discussion of competence of witnesses and admissibility of documents, see Macnair, *The Law of Proof*, p. 21.

<sup>75</sup> See Baker's discussion of proof, trial by ordeal and the evolution of the trial process: *An Introduction to English Legal History*, p. 85.



## ‘THE MOOR’S ABUSED BY SOME MOST VILLAINOUS KNAVE’

grounded in an oppression revealed by a healthy, written record. The crimes of Roderigo and Iago, and eventually Othello, do not become substantiated until the letters are discovered. Across the scenes in the five acts of the play, this scene becomes the one that offers substantive evidentiary proofs – letters – to confirm all that has been confessed by Othello, attested to and witnessed by Cassio and Emilia, and suppressed by Iago.

### *Roderigo’s First and Second Letters*

Shakespeare ‘papers’ the final moments of the play with letters. Even Othello’s words return in phantasmagoric fashion to haunt the proceedings: ‘Was this fair paper, this most goodly book / Made to write “whore” upon?’ (4.2.72–73).<sup>76</sup> These letters reveal the extent of the conspiracy between Roderigo and Iago.<sup>77</sup> At 5.2.306, Lodovico shares two of Roderigo’s letters just after Iago chooses silence:

Here is a letter  
Found in the pocket of the slain Roderigo,  
And here another: the one of them imports  
The death of Cassio, to be undertook  
By Roderigo.

(5.2.306–9)

To his co-conspirator’s downfall, Roderigo makes a written record of the conspiracy – not only are these records discovered, but displayed and read to the entire assembly at the end of the scene. This court-like scene offers two written exhibits from Iago’s co-conspirator. Now, it does not matter that Iago chooses to stand silent, as Roderigo admits in great detail each conspiracy, beyond the confessions offered by Othello and Emilia. These legal exhibits – and stage props – give the audience a narrative around the production and the presentation of written evidence. These two letters not only confirm Emilia’s testimony, but also implicate Othello in his attempt to murder Cassio by the hand of the contract killer Roderigo.<sup>78</sup>

### *Roderigo’s Third Letter*

With Roderigo slain by Iago, he cannot testify in this final scene of the play. The letters appear to

serve effectively against Iago, perhaps better than Roderigo would – for at every turn in this drama, the rejected swain-turned-killer followed Iago’s cue. Where Emilia’s testimony served as a surrogate for Desdemona, here Roderigo’s final letter supplants the words that either he or Iago could speak. Notably, at line 311, Lodovico explains:

Now here’s another discontented paper  
Found in his pocket too, and this, it seems,  
Roderigo meant t’have sent to this damned villain  
But that, belike, Iago in the nick  
Came in, and satisfied him

(5.2.311–15)

The pockets of Roderigo unravel this disturbing narrative in a way that leaves almost no unanswered questions, save one: why would Roderigo memorialize these unlawful schemes in several letters? Only the final letter, apparently, was meant for the blood-thirsty Iago’s eyes. Even further, at line 322, Cassio adds to Lodovico’s explanation of Roderigo’s letter. For Cassio, the letter emerges as the proof needed to understand the devices behind his own conspicuously rapid, yet inexplicable, downfall:

There is besides in Roderigo’s letter  
How he upbraids Iago, that he made him  
Brave me upon the watch, whereon it came  
That I was cast; and even but now he spake,  
After long seeming dead, Iago hurt him,  
Iago set him on.

(5.2.322–7)

Cassio not only learns of the contract for his death, but that his demotion was also a part of the conspiratorial plot between Iago and Roderigo. While some scholars expressed consternation by Shakespeare’s use of these letters as a mere ‘conceit’ at the end of the scene, they serve a powerfully persuasive presentation of the facts – as the audience knows them, but the

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<sup>76</sup> See Alan Stewart, *Shakespeare’s Letters* (Oxford and New York, 2008), p. 48.

<sup>77</sup> See Stephen Alford, *The Watchers: A Secret History of the Reign of Elizabeth I* (New York and London, 2012).

<sup>78</sup> See also Stewart, *Shakespeare’s Letters*, p. 292. He mentions all three letters from Roderigo.

characters on the stage do not.<sup>79</sup> They invoke the legal shift from witness testimony to written proofs. Here Othello also wants letters to help to remedy this sad end by testifying to his character. Unlike Iago's earlier admission in act 1, 'I am not what I am', Othello asks here in act 5:

I pray you, in your letters,  
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,  
Speak of me as I am.

(5.2.338–40)

Yet, the final 100 lines of the play do not sufficiently recover the character of Othello after the audience has watched him kill his innocent wife. Not only does the audience experience this visibly wrongful death in front of them, not off stage as in the Greek tradition, but Othello must rest with the revelations that Roderigo's words, a written admission, evoke.

After the reading of Roderigo's letters, Lodovico passes judgment upon Iago, determining to torture him, but delays a sentence against Othello in order to weigh his culpability based on what they now know from the testimony of the witnesses – and, most importantly, the letters of Roderigo, Iago's co-conspirator. Shakespeare – using Othello, of course – removes the need to make the determination against Othello where he punishes himself with suicide.<sup>80</sup> At first glance, this act tries to return some measure of honour to this fallen general. Yet this act presents as insufficient after the audience witnesses his trauma by Iago's machinations across five acts of this drama.

In these 360 lines of the play's final scene, we are not sufficiently recovered – neither is Othello, for he determines to take his own life as a result of Roderigo's admissions. While we have watched the stealth targeting of Othello by Iago for the entire play, and Othello succumbing to these underhanded acts, we are not fully satisfied with the result – where the scene should prosecute Iago, instead we have the prosecution of Othello. Why does the scene read like the culpability ultimately rests upon Othello? For example, there exists an underlying sense that he should have detected the malevolent machinations of Iago supported by the incompetent Roderigo.<sup>81</sup>

Nevertheless, I find this reading most problematic. We have witnessed Iago unravel the life of Othello at every turn – yet, at the end of the conspiracy, in its successful conclusion, we still place most of the blame upon Othello, not Iago. I make this declaration because the scene presents as if we are reading not the unfolding of Iago's conspiracies, but the prosecution of Othello as a fallout or consequence of Iago's conspiracy. Iago is silent. Iago silences his detractors, including his wife, Emilia. We do not get the live testimony of Roderigo or the complete testimony of Emilia – Othello remains the solitary, culpable figure on the stage after the bodies of Emilia and Desdemona have fallen. The women are not safe. The state is not safe. The play gives us an answer in which the once noble general kills himself. With Cassio's character restored, Othello must confront his attempts to kill his two closest champions.

#### CONCLUSION

I am abused.

(*Othello* 3.3.271)

How do we protect the little boy within the African diaspora from weaponized trauma? In 1944, a state court in South Carolina held a multiple murder trial for the killings of two little girls, the alleged perpetrator being George Stinney, Jr, 14 years old.<sup>82</sup> The trial lasted 3 hours. The jury returned a guilty verdict in 10 minutes.<sup>83</sup> Little or no defence was provided to counter the narratives filled with accusations, a rush to judgment, and the execution of the youngest person in the state. In 2014, this verdict was finally overturned. How do

<sup>79</sup> For the discussion of Ann Pasternak Slater and Thomas Rymer's response to the presentation of these letters, see Stewart, *Shakespeare's Letters*, pp. 292–3.

<sup>80</sup> For discussion of honour suicide, see Davoine and Gaudillière, *History beyond Trauma*, p. 17.

<sup>81</sup> Shaffer, 'Iago's malignity motivated', p. 196.

<sup>82</sup> Karen McVeigh, 'George Stinney was executed at 14. Can his family now clear his name?' *Guardian*, 22 March 2014.

<sup>83</sup> Linsey Bever, 'It took 10 minutes to convict 14-year-old George Stinney, Jr. It took 70 years after his execution to exonerate him', *Washington Post*, 18 December 2014.

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we respond to the trauma filling ‘the lines of Shakespeare’s 17th-century play, the 21st-century story of Atatiana Jefferson’s 8-year-old nephew, or even the 20th-century tragedy of 14-year-old George Stinney, Jr, where, after almost 70 years, someone spoke for him. Here, allies refused to be complicit. Protests and legal strategies were mobilized to address what Michelle Alexander called ‘structural harm traceable to our racial history’.<sup>84</sup> The trauma was abated – for a moment. In these seamless examples – fictional and factual – from Shakespeare’s *Othello* to Ms Jefferson’s 8-year-old nephew, we possess evidence of repeated trauma to African bodies: boys, men, girls and women.<sup>85</sup> When does trauma cease?<sup>86</sup> Almost as if in answer to my question, in the final pages of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon wrote: ‘I, the man of color, want only this: That the tool never possess the man. That the enslavement of man by man cease forever. That is, one by another. That it be possible for me to discover and love man, wherever

he may be.’<sup>87</sup> From *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello* to *The Tempest*, we continue to prosecute African bodies – they remain the site of violence. We find no justification in the nuances of these different characters – whether written during the Tudor or the Stuart era. We are left with Othello’s statement: ‘I am abused.’ Where are the allies who fight relentlessly for life, liberty and humanity – *before* the abuse? Ultimately, we must find a way to protect those little boys and girls who become men and women.

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<sup>84</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2012), p. xxx.

<sup>85</sup> Isabel Soto, ‘I knew that Spain once belonged to the Moors: Langston Hughes, Race and the Spanish Civil War’, *Research in African Literatures* 45 (2014), 130–46.

<sup>86</sup> Cynthia Young, ‘Black ops: Black masculinity and the War on Terror’, *American Quarterly* 66 (March 2014): 35–67.

<sup>87</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York, 1952), pp. 205–6. See also Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, p. 387.