PURDUE UNIVERSITY

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*
ISSN 1481-4374
Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

Volume 6 (2004) Issue 1 Article 10

# Race and Othello on Film

Laura Reitz-Wilson
*Purdue University*

Follow this and additional works at: http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb

Part of the Comparative Literature Commons, and the Critical and Cultural Studies Commons

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, Purdue University Press selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

## Recommended Citation

Reitz-Wilson, Laura. "Race and Othello on Film." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 6.1 (2004): <http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1213>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.
The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 11677 times as of 06/01/15. Note: the download counts of the journal's material are since Issue 9.1 (March 2007), since the journal's format in pdf (instead of in html 1999-2007).

PURDUE UNIVERSITY UNIVERSITY PRESS <http://www.thepress.purdue.edu>

***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture***

ISSN 1481-4374 <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>
Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series.* Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Langua-ge Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monog-raph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

***CLCWeb* Volume 6 Issue 1 (March 2004) Article 10**
**Laura Reitz-Wilson,**
**"Race and *Othello* on Film"**
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss1/10>

**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 6.1 (2004)**
**Thematic Issue *Shakespeare on Film in Asia and Hollywood***
**Edited by Charles Ross**
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss1/>

**Abstract:** In her article "Race and *Othello* on Film," Laura Reitz-Wilson discusses Shakespeare's treatment of race in *Othello* and compares it to what Hollywood as a producer of culture has done. Reitz-Wilson looks at nine different film versions and analyzes their approaches to Othello's race and character. She parses the historical and textual evidence for racism in Shakespeare's and concludes that it exists and should not be overlooked. Othello's otherness is, in fact, directly connected to his blackness, but Hollywood has rarely captured the tenuous line Shakespeare creates between barbarian and civilized Venetian. Her analysis of the film versions of *Othello* concentrates the cinematic and directorial tricks that directors have used to avoid the issue of race and concludes with a discussion of how Tim Blake Nelson's *O* presents the issue of a race in a way that is pedagogically useful.

**Laura REITZ-WILSON**

## Race and *Othello* on Film

Many critics of Shakespeare overlook parts of Othello by ignoring or downplaying the issue of race. They argue that Othello represents otherness and humanity as a whole rather than blackness per se. While the play is not simply about race, one cannot avoid Othello's color, or the racist remarks and attitudes of certain characters, or the plot itself. To argue that Othello should simply be viewed as alien or exotic ignores the very thing that so obviously sets him apart: the attitudes of others to his physical appearance. Hollywood films avoid the issue of race almost entirely, or if they do address race, it is by creating a stereotypical portrait of a black man.

Shakespeare was well aware of racial tension in England and included this tension in the play. In fact, he might have "shared some of the deep-seated fears of his contemporaries about black people.... *Othello* expresses as well as confirms the prejudices behind Elizabeth's decree banishing 'negars' from England" in 1601 (Ogude 164). In fact, as early as 1596, Queen Elizabeth complained of the numbers of black people in England. Racism in the sixteenth century did exist, although the ideas and images were only partially developed. The main component was that surrounding the color of the black man: "In England perhaps more than in southern Europe, the concept of blackness was loaded with intense meaning. Long before they found that some men were black, Englishmen found in the idea of blackness a way of expressing some of their most ingrained values. No other color except white conveyed so much emotional impact. As described by the Oxford *English Dictionary*, the meaning of *black* before the sixteenth century included, 'deeply stained with dirt; soiled, dirty, foul … having dark or deadly purposes, malignant; pertaining to or involving death, deadly; baneful, disastrous, sinister … foul, iniquitous, atrocious, horrible, wicked … indicating disgraces, censure, liability to punishment,' Black was an emotionally partisan color, the handmaid and symbol of baseness and evil, a sign of danger and repulsion" (Jordan 2).

Shakespeare created a character who reflected some of these attitudes, but who was most likely drawn from such sources as Leo Africanus's *Geographical Historie of Africa* as translated by John Pory in 1600. This text "contributed to the unruly and diverse sexuality of Africans; and it gave England a model for controlling the 'meaning' of Africa and the seemingly inexhaustible difference it represented" (Hall 29). Evidence for Shakespeare's use of the text can be seen in the similarities between Leo's life and Othello's. Leo was a Moor of noble descent who converted to Christianity, was sold into slavery, and was eventually redeemed. Othello is a Moor of noble descent, a convert to Christianity, and was sold into slavery and redeemed. Another connection to Africanus's history is that his description of Moors emphasizes many of the attributes seen in Othello: extreme jealousy, courage in battle, and pride. What Shakespeare did was combine the many descriptions from the document and construct "not a member of a particular society but a composite 'African,' a synthesis of details drawn from Leo's descriptions of both 'tawny' and 'black' Moors" (Berry 316). This mixture of descriptions allowed Shakespeare to step outside of a common negative stereotype. Othello's 'Africanness' is important not because of what he is, but because of how he is perceived, specifically by the other characters, and by himself.

Most characters in the play exhibit some type of racism toward Othello. His blackness "is not only a mark of his physical alienation but a symbol, to which every character in the play, himself included, must respond" ( Berry 318). Iago and Roderigo speak the most obvious racial slurs against Othello. Roderigo refers to the "thick-lips" (1.1.66), "gross clasps of a lascivious Moor" (1.1.126), and the "gross revolt" of Desdemona (1.1.134). He also labels Othello as a "wheeling stranger" (1.1.136). Iago makes several references to Othello's race as well, referring to him as an "old black ram" (1.1.88-89), a "devil" (1.1.91), and a " Barbary horse" (1.1.111-12). Othello is also associated with excessive sexuality when Iago tells Brabantio that his "daughter and the Moor are [now] making the beast / with two backs" (1.1.115-16). This cultural perception contributes to the racist atmosphere; Othello's sexuality is connected to his race, which is perceived as degenerate and disgusting.

Iago and Roderigo are not the only characters with outright disdain for Othello's race and culture. Brabantio also projects the negative images associated with blackness. Desdemona's father invites Othello to tell tales, but refuses to accept him as a son-in-law. Brabantio shows his anger when he refers to Othello as "too true and evil" (1.1.160), a "foul thief" (1.1. 62), and "Damn'd" (1.1.64). He is disgusted that Desdemona would "run from her guardage to the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as thou--to fear, not to delight!" (1.2.70-71) and "fall in love with what she fear'd to look on!" (1.3.98). In addition, Brabantio claims that the only possible way Desdemona could fall in love with Othello is if he used black magic. These statements reveal a racism similar to that of Iago and Roderigo.

Emilia, Iago's wife, reveals a more latent form of racism. Until the final scenes of the play she never mentions Othello's race. However, when she discovers her lady has been murdered, she displays her previously unspoken sentiments: "*Othello*: She's like a liar gone to burning hell: / 'Twas I that killed her. / *Emilia*: O, the more angel she, / And you the blacker devil!" (5.2.129-31). This quote suggest that Emilia has always thought of Othello as a black devil and now he is blacker as a result of the murder. She continues in a similar vein by referring to the marriage of Othello and Desdemona as Desdemona's "most filthy bargain" (5.2.157), and claims Othello is "as ignorant as dirt" (5.2.164). These statements are not changed even when she discovers her husband's part in the plot. Instead, Othello now seems foolish as well as evil. Emilia's statements may serve as the audience's catharsis. Her emotional outburst gives the audience a chance to express its own anger at Othello's actions.

Desdemona communicates an even more subtle form of racism. She falls in love with Othello not for his outward appearance but for his words. She states that she saw "Othello's visage in his mind" (1.3.252), but she does not say that she found his physical form attractive. By not referring to his body, Desdemona confirms her father's belief that she should fear to look on such blackness. Othello even attests to this when he agrees with Iago's statement that Desdemona "seem'd to shake and fear your looks" (3.3.207). All of these quotes suggest that even Desdemona realizes there is something unnatural about her love for Othello due to his physical appearance.

Another ingredient that makes the love unnatural is the cultural difference between the two, which is also connected to race. Desdemona oftentimes does not understand Othello because of cultural differences. She behaves aggressively in Venice and but also in Cyprus, where her aggressive promotion of Cassio allows Iago to cast aspersions on her. She also plays the traditional role of a Venetian woman in Cyprus, which advances Othello's jealousy. She is coy when Othello asks for the handkerchief. Differences in culture also emerge when Desdemona states ironically, when asked by Emilia whether Othello is jealous, "Who, he? I think the sun where he was born / Drew all such humors from him" (3.4.29-30). She is tragically unaware of Othello's feelings. Culture also separates their love because Othello loves her physically while Desdemona professes to love him for his heroic achievements. Othello seems obsessed with Desdemona's whiteness, while she plays down his blackness. Othello refers to Desdemona as "sweet" and "fair" most of the time. He seems constantly to think of her body and her color, "fair lady" (1.3125), "fair devil" (3.3.479), "Yet I'll not shed her blood, / Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow, / as smooth as monumental alabaster" (5.2.3-5), and "Turn thy complexion there, / Patience, thou young and rose-lipp'd cherubin -- / Ay, here look grim as hell!" (4.2.62-64). Shakespeare emphasizes the opposition of white and black and creates a gap between the lovers. At one point Othello is horrified not only because Desdemona "corrupts herself but because her 'blackness' confirms his" (Berry 328). As Othello says, "[Her] name, that was as fresh / As Dian's visage, is now begrim'd and black / As mine own face" (3.3.386-388). Thus *Othello* becomes "an authentic racial tragedy, a play that relates the 'tragic sense' to an uncanny awareness of racial differences and the inherent potentialities of race-related social tensions" (Ogude 162).

The use, or lack thereof, of Othello's name is important for racial reasons as well. Calling someone by name is a sign of respect. The characters in the play sometimes refer to Othello by his name, but often by the term "Moor." The amount of racial hostility the character has for Othello usually dictates the mode of address. Iago refers to Othello by name only five times in the play, usually when he is talking directly to him, while he calls him Moor over twenty-five times. Roderigo

never refers to him as Othello, but twice as "the Moor" and once as "thick-lips." Brabantio also never uses his name, but refers to him as "the Moor" approximately six times, while Emilia addresses Othello as Moor approximately eight times. Again, Othello is reduced to a thing, a social or racial class, as opposed to a human being. Desdemona also refers to Othello as "the Moor"; however, her reference is coupled with adjectives such as "noble" and "lord, " lightening the negative ramifications of her mode of address. Her epithets do not, however, erase the difference. Less racially charged characters, specifically the Duke, address Othello by his name. The Duke needs Othello for the battle at Cyprus; he cannot afford to offend him. Montano also refers to Othello as the "noble Moor" (2.3.138). Nonetheless, this continual reference to Othello as "the Moor" serves to remind the audience of Othello's inability to truly become a part of Venetian society.

How do these insinuations affect Othello? The Moor must protect himself from a society that does not accept his color and culture. He has only two means to do so: first, become totally assimilated into Venetian culture so that the Venetians unconditionally accept him; or, second, remain a barbarous outsider. His choice is to portray himself as assimilated, a "supreme achiever" (Ogude 157). Othello creates a protective exterior of "pride and purposes" and "[e]vades them, with a bombast circumstance / Horribly stuff'd with epithites of war," as Iago puts it (1.1.12-14). Othello diction does indeed seemed "stuffed," but his pomposity acts to buffer him from the loneliness of his situation, as well as his physical and social disabilities. Since most of the characters in the play point to his blackness, Othello creates an imaginary world for himself and is generally satisfied to suppress the truth of his situation. At one point, though, he gives us a glimpse of his true feelings, when he remarks that he is "black / And have not those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have" (3.3.263-65). Having shown that even he can see the difference between himself and Venetian society, Othello then dismisses the thought: "yet that's not much" (3.3.266). For a moment, however, the audience feels sympathy for Othello, for his struggle to hide his sense of inferiority. At one other point he mentions this flaw: "Rude am I in my speech, / And little bless'd with the soft phrase of peace" (1.3.81-2). And so Othello struggles to fit into a civil society that does not want him to fit in. His one claim to acceptance is his service to the state. When Othello must defend his marriage to Desdemona, he relies on his rank, abilities, virtue, and service as a soldier. However, these cannot protect him from pointed racial remarks, which hint at miscegenation. After his service to the state is completed, when the Turks are defeated, Othello is vulnerable to attack, and Iago strikes.

Hollywood's attempts to portray this complex hero are mediocre. Generally, Othello is whitewashed in films; in fact, the issue of race almost disappears. History plays a part in this, as we can see by looking at when the films were made. Films made in the 1950's feature created what is known as the "bronze" Othello and avoided most racial issues, while films made in the late twentieth century feature black actors and include more of the racial tension that is in the play. In my examination of the films I proceed chronologically and look at language, costuming, actions/plot line, and imagery/camera focus.

Orson Welles's *Othello* is dated 1952. Racial tensions were reaching a peak historically, leading up to the Civil Rights movement. According to James Stone, "Welles does much to strip Shakespeare's play of its racial thematics" (189). This was the time period for a bronze Othello. It was still considered shocking to show a very black man with a white woman. As a result, Othello is shown with only rarely, and then with a space between him and Desdemona, and he is a nice shade of golden brown. Welles's Othello looks different from the other characters in only two ways; he is slightly darker and he has a dark beard (the few characters in the film with beards have gray or white ones). The film's refusal to recognize race can be seen in its lack of racial language, costuming, actions, and camera focus. Most of the racial remarks made by Iago, Roderigo, Brabantio, and Emilia are cut from this movie. In fact the only remarks alluding to race in the entire movie, retained from the play, are "lascivious Moor," "sooty bosom," and Othello's title "the Moor." Brabantio alludes to Othello's use of witchcraft to woo his daughter and Othello himself mentions that he has been sold to slavery, but these are very evasive statements that do not point directly to the racial tensions that exist in the play. To create Othello as the "other" and to display his difference in culture, some productions dress him in robes and give him strange jewelry to

wear. Welles, however, is dressed similarly to the other characters in the play. His costumes seem to be more regal, but otherwise they are the same as those around him. For example, when Othello's ship arrives in Cyprus, Othello is dressed like his soldiers with the exception of his helmet, which seems to be some kind of turban. Another example occurs in Act one, scene 3, where most of the men are wearing large coats with fur collars. Othello's coat is larger, furrier, and appears more expensive than those of the others. Othello's actions in this film also tend to elevate rather than separate or devalue him. Probably following Stanislavski, Welles creates the illusion of a love story between Desdemona and Othello by placing them in a gondola in Venice. This addition persuades the audience that Othello is not a barbarian, but a great lover, well versed in the ways of the city built on canals. Moreover, Othello seems to be extremely self-confident in this film, he never doubts himself: "This Othello is vigorous, forceful, of deep and resonant voice, and his self-doubts in soliloquy are reduced in the screenplay, or else spoken with such stiff and oracular orotundity that they scarcely qualify as self-doubt" (Stone 190). What the film never shows is the contrast of Desdemona's white skin next to Othello's darkness. Welles separates black and white with camera angles, grids, bars, and nets. These tricks prevent the audience from coming to grips with the couple's relationship. Even in the death scene, when it would seem impossible not to focus on the difference in race or simply color, Welles reduces the conflict to camera angles and a study of black and white.

Made in 1955, also Sergei Yutkevitch's *Othello* contains a bronze-looking Othello. This film is very similar to Welles's in the way it avoids race. For example, many racial remarks are left out, the costuming and actions serve to elevate Othello's position, Othello is portrayed as extremely self-confident, and the camera angles do not focus on the difference in color. The dialogue included in this film downplays any racial tension. "Lascivious Moor," "beast with two backs," and Othello's title "the Moor" are the only overt references to race. In fact, Othello is usually addressed as "the noble Moor" even when this title is not in the play. Othello's speech that begins "Haply, for I am black" seems to be delivered with absolutely no idea of its meaning. The actor is in a rage and does not express the self-doubt these lines imply. Similar to Welles's film, and for the same reasons, there is a gondola scene of the two lovers, as well as an incredibly long introduction that glorifies Othello's conquests in battle. Both of these serve to elevate Othello's status in the audience's mind. Othello's costuming is very regal. Like the other characters, he wears Renaissance attire. He also wears a cape and has additional accessories, such as golden buttons. Even his staging seems more grandiose than that of the other characters. When he is telling the court the story of how he wooed Desdemona, a camera pan shows that everyone is riveted by his words. Othello is usually the focus of the camera and makes large sweeping arm movements, such as throwing his cape over his shoulder. His self-confidence does not stop there. While in the play Othello seems uncomfortable handling Desdemona and often pushes her off on someone else (Iago, Emilia), this Othello constantly pulls Desdemona close, often in an embrace. Also, although the camera focuses on Othello most of the time, it does not focus on the difference in skin color. Even when he embraces Desdemona, the two do not touch skin to skin. There is a long, passionate kiss between Desdemona and Othello when he arrives in Cyprus, but the audience cannot see his face because of his large helmet. Instead, it appears Desdemona is kissing his headgear. Stuart Burge's 1965 *Othello* is more revolutionary than the previous two, bringing the issue of race to the forefront. Laurence Olivier plays a very black Othello. Most of the racial language in the play is included. Even small references, those of Emilia and Desdemona are not cut. Othello's references to his race are kept as well and are interpreted, by Olivier, as Shakespeare intended them. For example the "Haply, for I am black" speech is delivered with the self-doubt that Shakespeare intended. While the camera does not show any favoritism for the contrast between Othello's and Desdemona's color, it does not avoid it either. There are several close shots of the two lovers. This film seems a much truer portrait of Shakespeare's play than previous films, but it does border on a stereotypical portrait of a black man. Olivier's costumes set him apart and are quite ethnic, his actions are exaggerated and leering, and the camera does not hesitate to show the difference between black and white. The most obvious differences in this film from the previous two are the costuming and actions of Othello. Throughout the film, Olivier wears robes that look African or ethnic. He also wears a neck-

lace that looks like a gigantic rosary, as well as several others equally strange ornaments. He is many times seen barefoot, wearing large metal bracelets around his ankles and wrists. When Othello arrives in Cyprus, his helmet is like a turban and has a large cross on top, as opposed to the unadorned turbans depicted in previous films. These very outward signs of Christianity seem to be a part of Othello's charade of assimilation. The ethnic costuming in this film, therefore, separates and racializes Othello. Othello's actions also set him apart from the Venetians. Olivier "wore a crinkly wig, and 'remade' his whole personality from speech to gesture to gait. He tried to look, sound, and walk like a 'Negro'" (Kaul 19). As a result, Othello sometimes leers at the camera and looks uncomfortable around Venetians. Also, Olivier's Othello physically holds Desdemona at a distance. He even cringes from her in several scenes, displaying the discomfort Othello should feel according to the play. He also has a strange moment where he smells a flower in act one, scene two, when Iago comes to warn him that Brabantio is upset about the marriage. This open display of love, with impending danger near, could again be a display of what Othello perceives as his assimilation. This flower scene is repeated in other films that similarly portray the racial tension that is in the play.

BBC's 1981 *Othello* is a full text version of the play, so the inclusion of racial language is not an issue. There is a large gap of sixteen years between the Olivier version and this one. One would guess that this film would be equally as forward as the1965 version, since there had been great strides in the Civil Rights arena during that period. However, this film seems to have totally lost the issue of race. In fact, many of the lines in the film do not make sense, since a white man plays Othello. Apparently, the BBC had asked James Earl Jones to portray Othello, but Jones was barred from the British actors' association. Instead, Anthony Hopkins plays Othello in what the BBC self-justified as "an Arab" character (Kaul 19). The producers argued that race and its importance in the play are overrated. Hopkins's costuming is the same as that of other characters in the film. He seems very relaxed and even takes liberties with Venetians. For example, he leans on a table when speaking to the Duke, whereas Othello should feel uncomfortable about such presumptuous gestures. Hopkins also delivers his lines in a very low key. He displays little passion, although Shakespeare's Othello is a passionate man, which may even be one of his ethnic or cultural downfalls. Camera angles may be the only place where Othello is racialized. Othello is usually shown from behind or in profile and is often shadowed, perhaps to make Hopkins look darker skinned. Nonetheless this film seems to be a complete whitewashing of the play.

Among the films discussed here, it is in Franklin Melton's 1984 *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*, where Othello is played by a black man (William Marshall). Marshall performs the role convincingly although somewhat toned down. This film is also a full text version of the play, so it includes all references to race and culture. The costuming does not set Othello apart, but it also does not elevate him. Othello wears Renaissance attire similar to that of all the other characters in the film, although he sports a fist-sized cross for most of the film and he wears earrings. The meaning seems to be that Othello bears the mark of his assimilation (the cross), yet still has the look of an outsider (the earrings). Like his costuming, Othello's actions are somewhat strange and deliberate. Marshall speaks with an accent, but it seems forced. His voice is also very deep and rich, similar to Olivier's. There is a repeat of the flower scene in the 1965 version as well, since Othello is holding a bouquet of flowers when Iago first meets him. Because this film is the record of a stage production, there are few notable camera angles or shadows. It is hard to classify it in terms of cinema, but worth mentioning, as it shows the influence of other films.

Franco Zefirelli's 1986 *Otello* is an opera film, sung in Italian with English subtitles. Translation changes some of the racial language, but the text does not often follow the original anyway and most of the overt references to race are skipped because the film begins with the landing in Cyprus. However, the reference to Othello as "thick lips" remains as well as three later references to color: "repulsive savage," "darkness of your brow" (Desdemona to Othello), and "perhaps because I am black" (Othello -- "Haply for I am black"). As a result, visual aspects of the difference in color and culture are much more apparent than spoken ones. Othello's costuming does not set him apart, but his dark color does. The opera begins with a massive kiss between the Othello and Desdemona, black against white, a contrast that occurs several more times in the film. Desdemo-

na, particularly in bedroom scenes, is very white. She is dressed in white, has blond hair, light skin, and is lying in a bed of white. Her fairness is contrasted with Othello's darker clothing and very dark skin and hair. Even the final image of the film is that of black and white, as the two lie dead on the steps to their balcony. Although there is strong imagery of black and white, the film still seems to be focused elsewhere. There are hundreds of extras that take our attention away from Othello and Desdemona. There is also an underlying homoerotic tone to the movie that, like certain religious overtones, seems traceable to Zeffirelli's homosexuality and the Catholic culture of Italy. Iago and Roderigo flounce around in a bedroom when Iago is telling of his plans for Othello, and Othello and Iago have a strangely homosocial relationship as well. Iago and Satan seem to be linked with Iago's damning of Jesus in the church, yet Iago sends Othello to that church to pray. It is not clear if this is meant to portray Othello's assimilation or the religious paradoxes of Italian culture.

Janet Suzman's 1987 *Othello* from South Africa is very similar to the 1984 Melton production. It is full text and has a prominent black actor, Tony award winner John Kani, in the role of Othello. His costuming is slightly ethnic as are his actions. Camera angles are restricted in the same way they are in the Melton version. In this a stage version put on film, Othello wears an open shirt, earrings, and a necklace that brings to mind an African warrior. There are no signs of Christianity on his body, no signs of assimilation. Othello's actions are a bit strange and forced in the film. Whether this is due to poor acting or a purposeful decision is hard to tell. There is a repeat of the flower smelling scene from Act I scene ii. Othello also speaks with an accent that seems distantly Jamaican.

Oliver Parker's 1995 *Othello* again places a prominent black actor in the role of Othello. While Othello, played by Laurence Fishburne, does not seem truly to be an outsider in this version, many of the racial tensions remain. Most of the racial language is included in the film. However, Othello is confident, almost too confident, in many scenes when he should seem uncomfortable. In addition, Fishburne's costumes are very similar to the rest of the cast. He wears black pants and a white billowy shirt with tall black boots in many scenes. He appears in robes once or twice and has earrings in both ears, but generally blends in. Racial tension is developed in other ways in this film, mainly by music and camera focus. At several integral moments there are jungle sounding drums in the background. These sounds occur during the celebration at Cyprus as well as during Othello and Desdemona's love-making. Black on white images are the most powerful tool this film uses to create racial tension. When Othello and Desdemona share a passionate kiss in Cyprus , everyone seems uncomfortable. During one speech (1.3.395), Iago drops two chess pieces in a well, one black, one white. This image is repeated at the end of the film, when the dead bodies of Othello and Desdemona are dumped into the ocean. Another black on white image is that of hands. During the bedroom scene, there is a close up of Othello's hand gripping Desdemona's. This image is not as powerful as Spike Lee's image in *Jungle Fever*, however, because Laurence Fishburne's hand seems to be fairly light. Another image used to convey racial tension happens during Othello's second seizure. Othello seems to be bound in chains during his seizure, hinting at his role of slave in society. Although this film is contemporary, it lacks the balance Shakespeare intended. Othello is still elevated somewhat, and the film does not focus on his race.

Tim Blake Nelson's 2001 *"O"* is an adaptation and modernization of the play. Othello is played by a young black actor, Mikhi Phifer, who has also since starred in *8 Mile. "O"* seems to finally capture the balance Shakespeare intended between portraying Othello as an other, based on his race, and the problem of stereotyping a black character. Thke solution is to have Odin (Othello) question his position in society inwardly while appearing to be a very confident young man on the outside. The costuming and actions are not racially charged, but issues discussed by characters in the film as well as music and camera focus serve to create racial tension. Contemporary topics, such as the use of the word nigger, are introduced to establish the racial atmosphere. In this example the point is that blacks are allowed to use the word, while whites are not: "*Odin*: I can say that because I am a nigger. You can't because you ain't. Don't be jealous. / *Desi*: Why can't I say it? My people invented the word. / *Odin*: You can't even think it. / *Desi*: You're the one who started it.

You said I was so fine you'd let me dress you up and play black buck got lose in the big house. / *Odin*: Don't go repeatin' that, all right? Another black person would say somethin' like that and I can get my Negro League card revoked." This is followed by laughter, and it seems the two have an understanding. When nigger is used by a white person it symbolizes derogatory or stereotypical meanings. Among blacks, however, it means solidarity or serves as self-identity. Mike (Michael Cassio) demonstrates this, later in the film, when he says "the ghetto popped out of him.... he's a crazy nigger," using the word to indicate his anger and disgust towards Odin. One other example of the underlying racism captured by this film through language occurs when Desi asks Emily (Emilia), "Would you be so concerned if he was white?" This is in reference to Emily's concern that Odin raped Desi. Music plays a small part in developing the balanced portrayal of Othello as the black other. Hip hop or rap music populates this film, mostly because of current pop culture. However, this music is still dominated by black artists who discuss black issues. In fact, one song lists the differences between blacks and whites during the movie entitled *Black Like The.* Much of the racial tension in the film is developed by camera focus. The first image shows hundreds of white doves and then a single dark brown hawk, which represents Odin, the only black amongst many whites. Then the screen cuts to black, and a white 'O' appears. Black and white imagery continues throughout the film. Mikhi Phifer is quite black and Julia Stiles, who plays Desdemona, is very white. This contrast creates a noticeable difference in the several bedroom scenes where the actors are undressed. There are many close-ups of Desi's and Odin's hands on each others bodies, clearly showing the difference in color, as well as a cut scene that moves from her face to his face and back several times. There are also many kissing scenes that show the couple from the side, which makes the color difference obvious. In addition to this, there are also visual references to entrenched racist ideas dating back to slavery. For example, Odin has a large scar on his back which is reminiscent of those sustained by victims of the lash. There is also the scene of sexual assault where Odin apparently visualizes Desi with Mike and gets violent with Desi in the middle of their love-making.

Shakespeare created a multifaceted character. Othello's downfall is rooted in his passionate and temperamental Moorish nature, but he is also articulate, intelligent, and introspective. This balance is not reflected in most Hollywood versions of the play. However, time period may be the largest factor affecting an accurate portrayal. Each film is a reflection not only of an interpretation of the play, but of the current ideas of the time, involving race. It was not until the late second half of the twentieth century that society started to see strides in the civil rights arena. Today's attitudes may be the closest society has come to reflecting those of the Elizabethans in regards to race. This is why *"O"* is so successful at emulating Shakespeare's *Othello.* Shakespeare created a complicated character and an even more complex play. Many critics claim that Othello is a simple play about jealousy. However, this play delves much deeper into issues of race, self-doubt, assimilation, ego, and even sex. One cannot separate Othello's otherness from his color and culture, because these factors are what make him "the other." As Kim Hall demonstrates, there is a danger of avoiding the issue of race in *Othello*: "much of the seeming anxiety over the propriety of the use of the term "race" in the Renaissance works to exclude an antiracist politics. Dismissing the term "race" altogether or imposing absolute historical boundaries between really modern and contemporary constructions may allow us not to think about race either in Renaissance texts or in our classrooms. More specifically, it serves to maintain white privilege in Renaissance studies, the luxury of not thinking about race -- hence duplicating racism in writing and professional relations" (Hall 255).25. Hollywood has tried to capture this complex character numerous times and continues to try to find the right balance between outsider and Venetian. Many have come close: Olivier, Marshall, Fishburne, and Nelson in the movies examined here. However, many productions tend to avoid the issue of race which is an indispensable part of the play. A true picture of Othello would be as follows, "As a Moor, he is clearly presented as Other, but not necessarily an offensive Other; the qualifier *noble* Moor does not extricate him from the realm of the exotic, yet it undermines the perception of him as evil. The association of him with blackness and its numerous signifieds, however, clearly locates him in the world of the undesirable. This blackness is articulated in a culture in which black is the color of degeneracy and damnation" (Butler-Evans 146). Because the majori-

ty of the films ignore the problem of race in *Othello*, it seems that Hollywood has painted Othello "far more fair than black."

**Works Cited**

Africanus, Leo. *A Geographical Historie of Africa.* Trans. John Pory. London: Georg Bishop, 1600.
Berry, Edward. "Othello's Alienation." *Studies in English Literature* 30.2 (1990): 315-34.
Butler-Evans, Elliott. "'Haply, for I Am Black': *Othello* and the Semiotics of Race and Otherness." *Othello: New Essays by Black Writers.* Ed. Mythili Kaul. Washington: Howard UP, 1997. 139- 50.
Evans, G. Blakemore, ed. *The Riverside Shakespeare.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974.
Hall, Kim F. *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England.* Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995.
Jordan, Winthrop. "The Simultaneous Invention of Slavery and Racism." *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812.* Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1968. 1-8.
Kaul, Mythili. "Background: Black or Tawny? Stage Representations of Othello from 1604 to the Present." *Othello: New Essays by Black Writers.* Ed. Mythili Kaul. Washington: Howard UP, 1997. 1-19.
*''O."* Dir. Tim Blake Nelson. Mekhi Phifer, Josh Hartnett, and Julia Stiles. Lions Gate Entertainment, 2001.
Ogude, S.E. "Literature and Racism: The Example of *Othello.*" *Othello: New Essays by Black Writers.* Ed. Mythili Kaul. Washington: Howard UP, 1997. 151-66.
*Othello.* Dir. BBC. Anthony Hopkins, Bob Hoskins. BBC/TIMELIFE, 1981.
*Othello.* Dir. Stuart Burge. Laurence Olivier, Maggie Smith. Culver City: Writing Company, 1965.
*Othello.* Dir. Oliver Parker. Laurence Fishburne, Irene Jacob, Kenneth Branagh. Culver City: Writing Company, 1995.
*Othello.* Dir. Janet Suzman. John Kani, Richard Haddon, Joanna Weinberg. FOTH, 1988.
*Othello.* Dir. Orson Welles. Orson Welles, Michael MacLiammoir, Robert Coote. Image Entertainment, 1952.
*Othello.* Dir. Sergei Yutkevitch. Sergei Bondarchuk. MOSFILM, 1955.
*Otello.* Dir. Franco Zeffirelli. Placido Domingo, Katia Ricciarelli. The Cannon Group, 1986.
Stone, James W. "Black and White as Technique in Orson Welles' *Othello.*" *Literature/Film Quarterly* 30.2 (2002): 189-93.
*The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice.* Dir. Franklin Melton. William Marshall, Ron Moody, Jenny Agutter. BARD, 1984.

Author's profile: Laura Reitz-Wilson teaches Shakespearian dramatic literature and college composition at William Henry Harrison High School in Tippecanoe County, Indiana. She is also working towards her Ph.D. in comparatve literature at Purdue University and is now completing a book of autobiographical essays. E-mail: <lwilson@tsc.k12.in.us>.