

“Dangerous Conceits”:

Racial Bodies and Microaggression in Shakespeare’s Othello

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ABSTRACT: Many scholars read Othello, written during England’s entrance onto the global stage as a colonial power, as Shakespeare’s reflection upon the increasingly diverse population of England and the rise of a modern conception of race and racism. While conceptions of race and racism shift with culture, Othello is positioned at the inception of racism and systems of oppression that are still at work today. Similarly, subtle racial slights towards Othello mirror what Professor Chester Pierce first termed as microaggressions. Drawing on Kevin Nadal’s clinical research and the poetry of Claudia Rankine that details the bodily experience of microaggressions, I argue that the barrage of subtle and explicit racism that Othello experiences provide context for what at first appears to be an unbelievably quick turn against Desdemona. Othello’s tragic demise, rather than resulting from an individual character flaw, demonstrates the devastating and accumulated impact of microaggressions on racialized bodies and their collective function within a system of oppression.

KEYWORDS: Microaggression, Othello, race, racialized bodies, racism, Shakespeare

Introduction

As the subtitle to Shakespeare's *Othello, The Moor of Venice* implies, both the titular character and the play itself are immersed in the burgeoning discourse of race and racism. Many scholars read *Othello*, written during England's "establishment as a colonial power" (Antor 2016, 73), as Shakespeare's reflection upon "both the physical presence of racial 'others' in England and an incipient ideology of racism . . . that arose from a new, and distinctly modern, attitude towards race, and especially colour" (Schalkwyk 2004, 1). Though conceptions of race and racism shift as culture develops, *Othello*'s discussion of race remains relevant within contemporary systems of racism and oppression. Similarly, subtle racial slights towards "His Moorship" (1.1.34) mirror what Professor Chester Pierce first termed microaggressions, the "incidents of racial antagonism [that] might seem small, but once properly understood are shown to play a role in large systems of oppression" (Rini 2021, 15). Although critics often read *Othello*'s wrath and jealousy as a tragedy of "the deadly sins of the spirit" (Bevington 2013, 605), *Othello* can also be interpreted as a tragedy of the deadly impact of microaggressions on the spirit. Microaggressions accumulate, and the racism that *Othello* experiences provide context for what appears to be an implausibly quick turn against Desdemona in Act 3 Scene 3. *Othello*'s tragedy demonstrates the devastating impact of microaggressions on racialized bodies and the collective function of those microaggressions within a system of oppression.

Microaggressions in *Othello*

Building from Pierce's work, Derald Wing Sue popularized the definition of microaggressions as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group" (Rini 2021, 20). In Kevin Nadal's discussion of racial microaggressions and trauma (2018), he highlights being treated as a second-class citizen, feeling like an alien in one's own land, assumption of criminality, colourblindness, and (often negative) ascription of intelligence from Sue's taxonomy of microaggressions (60), all of which describe the racism in *Othello*.

Before the audience encounters the titular character, "Othello is othered by Iago and Roderigo onstage, and this emphasis on his alterity is closely linked to his physical blackness." Roderigo calls him "the thick-lips" (1.1.68) while Iago refers to him as a conventionally black "devil" (1.1.93) and portrays him as a lesser other through the sexual and colour-coded bestial imagery of "an old black ram / Is tugging your white ewe" (1.1.90–91). "Othello is not once referred to by his name in this scene" (Antor 2016, 74) to emphasize the foreignness of the Moor of Venice within the Venetian social hierarchy (Comensoli 2004, 90), as he remains a "wheeling stranger / Of here and everywhere" (1.1.139–40) despite his work for and position within the state. Even though "Moor" was not an inherently

derogatory term and simply referred to anyone of Arabian or African descent (Bevington 2013, 606), Iago and Roderigo use it here to other *Othello*. When Brabantio discovers that his daughter married *Othello*, he accuses *Othello* of witchcraft, citing magic as the only possible explanation "[f]or nature so preposterously to err" that his daughter would desire a "sooty bosom" (1.3.64, 1.2.71). While Brabantio's assumption of criminality argues for the unnaturalness of miscegenation and activates negative stereotypes of the East (Antor 2016, 80), Desdemona asserts that his stories allowed her to almost literally "overlook his blackness" (Lutz 2019, 307) in favour of the "visage in his mind" (1.3.255). Desdemona's colourblindness ignores the racism that *Othello* faces, resulting in her unintentionally othering *Othello* (Antor 2016, 102) when she asks, "why gnaw you so your nether lip?" (5.2.46). Additionally, in constructing *Othello*'s race as something to be ignored, Desdemona implies that whiteness is the neutral default, which only further others *Othello*. As Iago insults *Othello*'s "uncivilized" intelligence and labels him an "erring barbarian" (1.3.358), all of Nadal's examples of racial microaggression occur in the first Act alone.

The Duke appears to address this persistent and developing ideology of racism, dismissing Brabantio's racist ranting as "thin habits and poor likelihoods / Of modern seeming" (1.2.110–11). Even though his statement criticizes racism as an unfounded "recent but widespread and popular prejudice" (Antor 2016, 83), he also compliments *Othello* as "far more fair than black" (1.3.293), which "still operates on a racialist analogy linking what is 'fair' to virtue and what is 'vice' to blackness" (Lutz 2019, 314). Despite the microaggressions that pervade even his praise, *Othello* appears unaffected, and "the possibility of racist discrimination does not even seem to occur to him" (Antor 2016, 81). While *Othello* does not hear Iago's and Roderigo's most heinous racial insults, even if *Othello*'s calm demeanour derives from ignorance of racism rather than—as the sheer ubiquity of microaggressions implies—simply being used to it, Claudia Rankine (2014) argues that "the body has memory" of the microaggressions it experiences (27). Iago exploits this bodily memory to convince *Othello* of Desdemona's infidelity.

Bodily and Physical Imagery

Corporeal imagery dominates Iago and *Othello*'s conversation. For example, jealousy's "green-eyed monster, which doth mock / The meat it feeds on" (3.3.119, 179–80) begins to affect *Othello*'s body. "Iago uses bodies as instruments" (Antor 2016, 94) in both graphically describing Desdemona's adultery and in the effect he has on *Othello*:

Dangerous conceits are in their natures
poisons, Which at the first are scarce found
to distaste, But, with a little act upon the
blood, Burn like the mines of sulphur.
(3.3.329–333)

Iago's description mirrors both Pierce's experience of seemingly insignificant microaggressions and Rankine's (2014) description of them as a "daily diminishment

[that] is a low flame, a constant drip” (29). Through affecting Othello’s humoral body, Iago also affects his racial body, as he argues that Desdemona should be with someone “Of her own clime, complexion, and degree, / Where to we see in all things nature tends” (3.3.246–47). Iago says this in response to Othello repeating, without any prompting from Iago, Brabantio’s espousal of unnatural miscegenation, as Othello wonders aloud whether Desdemona marrying him is truly “nature erring from itself” (3.3.243); Othello is aware of the racial microaggressions directed towards him, and racist concepts deeply impact his sense of self.

Othello worries that he cannot be loved and, like many victims of microaggressions, experiences issues of low self-esteem (Nadal 2018, 61). While Othello is undoubtedly a play about jealous passion, Othello first voices his doubt of Desdemona in racial terms, and he directly connects his lack of self-confidence partially to negative conceptions of his race: “Haply, for I am black / And have not those soft parts of conversation” (3.3.279–80). Othello later unknowingly repeats “Iago’s animal comparison from Act 1” (Antor 2016, 100) in referring to himself as a “hornèd man’s a monster and a beast” (4.1.60), which implies that Othello has already heard and internalized these racist insinuations. Iago’s careful rhetoric, like all microaggressions, does not operate “in isolation” (Rini 2021, 73); Iago can flip Othello’s opinion of Desdemona in a single scene because he activates Othello’s history of microaggressions, serving as a triggering case that “suddenly releases the built-up experiential aftermath of many different oppressive acts” (89).

Just as microaggressions can negatively impact an individual’s self-esteem, they can also make an individual doubt their own conclusions. Othello’s insistence on physical “ocular proof” (3.3.376) further mirrors the experience of microaggressions, as victims are often uncertain if they have even occurred; Pierce, a Black man similarly occupying a position of power in a white-dominated space, wrote “[o]ne could argue that I am hypersensitive, if not paranoid, about what must not be an unusual kind of student-faculty dialogue” (Rini 2021, 28). Just as “trifles light as air / Are to the jealous confirmations strong” (3.3.338–30), Iago uses Othello’s hypervigilant paranoia against him to provide visual and bodily proof of Desdemona’s infidelity. Desdemona’s lost handkerchief, which Iago ensures Cassio comes to possess, and Iago’s graphic conversation with Cassio about his relationship with Bianca in Act 4 Scene 1, which Othello believes refers to Desdemona, thus become irrefutable evidence of infidelity to a man constantly plagued with the uncertainty that accompanies microaggressions.

Iago’s weaponization of microaggressions brings Othello’s Blackness to the forefront. After Iago falsely tells Othello that Cassio confessed to having an affair with Desdemona, Othello becomes “light of brain” (4.1.271) and can no longer control his racialized body, as he falls into a seizure after an increasingly fragmented monologue where the mind and body merge (Vozar 2012, 185). In addition to Iago’s racist insinuations literally possessing and seizing Othello’s body (Vozar

2012, 184), Othello himself echoes Brabantio’s racist insinuation of witchcraft when he tells Desdemona that the handkerchief has “magic in [its] web” (3.4.71), as if to see whether the one person who supposedly does not see his black body could believe the racist rhetoric. Othello’s repetition of the racial microaggressions he experiences further illustrates the complete racialization of his body—even within his own mind, Othello cannot escape racist stereotypes. As Othello’s mental state deteriorates, Desdemona remarks that “[m]y lord is not my lord, nor should I know him / Were he in favour as in humour altered” (3.4.122–123). The seemingly sudden and transformative change in Othello’s temper mirrors Rankine’s assertion that the eruption of anger due to a triggering microaggression “might make the witness believe that a person is ‘insane’” (Rankine 2014, 25). Though microaggressions, and an individual’s response to them, may appear like an isolated event to those who do not constantly experience microaggressions, they are both connected to a larger system of oppression acting on Black bodies.

Structural Power Dynamics

Othello specifically considers the “issue neither of race nor of sexuality but of power” (Emily C. Bartels qtd. in Antor 2016, 77), as Othello and Desdemona’s marriage breaks the conventions of “social structures [treated] as if they were natural forces” (Rini 2021, 84). Brabantio directly invokes this transgression, as he perceives



Othello's marriage as not only unnatural but as a threat to the established political and social hierarchy (Antor 2016, 81) when he proclaims "[f]or if such actions may have passage free, / Bondslaves and pagans shall our statesmen be" (1.2.99–100). Iago, angry over not being promoted, similarly raises his self-worth and reasserts his power "by reducing Othello and others to his own miserable condition" (Bevington 2013, 607), with all the play's "villains 'continually invok[ing] the clichés of accepted belief'" (Eldred Jones qtd. in Lutz 2019, 306) and using abstractions to oppress others. Iago especially employs sweeping statements and a priori logical justifications (Bevington 2013, 608) to convince Othello that Desdemona must be unfaithful, not only because she is a Venetian woman and "[i]n Venice they do let God see pranks / They dare not show their husband" (3.3.217–17), but also because she must logically prefer to be with a white man. Iago uses accepted cultural generalizations as "a misogynist and racist who uses the bodily otherness of blacks as well as women to construct a discourse of negative alterity that marginalizes and subjects them to his own masculine authority" (Antor 2016, 89). Through his use of microaggressions, Iago works to restore the power relations of the world to what he deems as their proper order.

Though microaggressions are harmful, "the problem is a vast social structure that operates through individuals . . . [and] internal mechanisms keeping oppressed people down" (Rini 2021, 78). Iago embodies the duality of the internal and external nature of microaggressions, as he resembles "both the Vice and the devil, suggesting his relationship both to Othello's inner temptation and to a preexistent evil force" (Bevington 2013, 608). However, constructing Othello's jealous and wrathful inclinations as inherent "inner temptation[s]" ignores the microaggressions that slowly erode Othello's sense of self. Iago is simply an individual exploiting Othello's racial insecurities using patterns of oppression; Othello's sinful vices can therefore be read as symptoms of Othello internalizing the racist stereotypes he constantly encounters throughout the play. Although "oppression doesn't require any central director or explicit plan", narratives often require "villains, people who set out to cause massive harm through deviously clever manipulation" (Rini 2021, 83; 79). While Iago's "motive hunting of a motiveless malignity", as Samuel Taylor Coleridge terms it, evokes the tradition of morality plays (Bevington 2013, 606), his nebulous and amorphous motivation also leaves an individual-shaped hole in the play that invites the audience to look through Iago to the systems behind his racist and misogynist microaggressions.

Language and Reified Bodies

Othello ends with bodies becoming "defamiliarized and 'petrified'" (Antor 2016, 103) as Othello kills Desdemona before killing himself; Othello describes Desdemona as "whiter skin of hers than snow, / And smooth as monumental alabaster" and states that she "dost stone my heart" (5.2.4–5, 67). Their bodies, the physical signifier of their sexual and racial difference, are forever racialized and gendered, immobilized through Iago's use of microaggressions and their connected systems of oppression. While Othello acknowledges his culpability,

in his final monologue he emerges as both the victim and the perpetrator and complicates the neat categorizations of others. As Antor (2016) explains, "by 'smiting' himself in the same way that he 'smote' [(5.2.366)] the Turk in Aleppo, Othello also places himself in the role of the Turk, he becomes both slayer and slain, Venetian defender and Turkish enemy" (105).

The play draws attention to "the body as the site not only of desire but also of linguistic overdetermination" (Schalykyk 2004, 20), as Desdemona calls Iago's construction of white and black as polar and moral opposites "old fond paradoxes" (2.1.139); Othello arguably kills Desdemona first in his description of her, as through comparing her to "absolute whiteness . . . he raises her to an absolute, dead ideal" (6). When Othello gives the epilogue to his story, instructing his audience to "[s]peak of me as I am; nothing extenuate, / Nor set down aught in malice" (5.2.352), Othello "reminds us of the complex interaction of the empirical and the ideal" (Schalkwyk 2004, 7), as the white Venetian Iago is the play's true devilish monster. Crucially, he also does not use the absolutes of white and black, and only refers to Desdemona as a more relative "pearl" and himself as the shades of an "Indian" (5.2.357). Othello's final words reject a polarizing and absolute concept of otherness and draw attention to microaggressive language that works to create and enforce seemingly clear and natural categories of others.

Conclusion

Othello demonstrates how microaggressions, as some of the smallest links that connect to larger systems of oppression, can arrest and trap bodies into racial categories within similarly racialized power dynamics. As microaggressions accumulate, they can undermine an individual's self-worth, even to the point of contributing to a complete and abject catastrophe worthy of immortalization through one of Shakespeare's tragedies. Othello's audience within the play seems to understand this destructive potential of microaggressions. Just as Gratiano's statement that "[a]ll that is spoke is marred" (5.2.367) can be read as "a warning against a literal understanding of any such discursive concepts" as otherness, Lodovico's comment on the bed-grave that "poisons sight" (5.2.375) similarly implies an understanding of the corruptible perception of bodies. Even though the play does not escape the "mechanisms of othering" (Antor 2016, 105), as Othello reinforces the dichotomy between Turks and Venetians and Lodovico still refers to Othello as "the Moor" in addition to dehumanizing Iago as a "Spartan dog" (5.2.377, 372), "Othello is a play of missed opportunities and thwarted potentialities" (Lutz 2019, 315) that, with a clearer perception and the right conversations, could have been averted. While Rankine (2014) relays the crushing experience of asserting one's identity only to realize that "no amount of visibility will alter the ways in which one is perceived" (25), Othello's final recognition scene, where he asserts his presence to the play's diegetic audience during the very inception of systemic racism, creates the possibility of awareness within the non-diegetic audience regarding the consequences of their own seemingly insignificant microaggressive acts.

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