THE MAKING AND UNMAKING OF A COLONIAL SUBJECT: OTHELLO

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Is there in truth any difference between one racism and another? Do not all of them show the same collapse, the same bankruptcy of man?
Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

Taking off his spectacles, as was his habit before enunciating a general truth, he looked into them sadly, and remarked that the darker races are physically attracted by the fairer, but not vice versa—not a matter for bitterness this, not a matter for abuse, but just a fact which any scientific observer will confirm.
E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India*

I. TRAVEL NARRATIVES AND AFRICA

As Edward Said remarks, it is something of a commonplace to hear that lite-rature and culture in general are politically and historically innocent, and that, more specifically, knowledge about Shakespeare, among many other writers, is not political. But as Said concludes, that is not the case (1979: 27), espe-

cially so when we examine the "racial disturbances," to use John Salway's words, which appear in some of Shakespeare's plays. Characters such as Caliban, Shylock, Aaron or Othello bring up racial issues which are central to the dramatic action of the plays, to the history of their interpretation, and to their stage history, and which demand our critical attention. Of all the strange and monstrous characters which abound in Shakespeare's plays, from the distinctive portrayal of Shylock as a Jew to the description of Caliban as an ugly and deformed slave, perhaps the most shocking are the spectacles of blackness presented for Elizabethan audiences in characters such as Aaron and Othello, a plain black villain the former, a gallant Moor the latter.

As Jones explains in *Othello's Countrymen*, African characters of varying colours—generally called "moors"—were part of the London stage tradition. Devils in the medieval mystery play had black faces, the participants of the Morris dance had their faces blackened up, and a set character in the medieval mummers plays was the "king of Egypt," who had a black face (Jones 1971b: 28). The Elizabethans distinguished between black Moors or Negroes whose blackness and malignity was emphasized in the text, and the white or tawny Moor, portrayed as a dignified oriental but, as Jones explains, still capable of the cruelty credited to all Moors (Jones 1971b: 86-87). Whereas Aaron appears simply as the cruel black Moor, different accounts have gone into different aspects of Othello's blackness: some are concerned with the precise shade of his blackness, others claim he was a tawny or white Moor, others that he was the villanous type of black Moor, or that he was just a confusion of the two types. But whatever shade of black Othello was in Shakespeare's imagination is not the crucial issue. What is more important, as Loomba remarks, is the fact that black was a "political colour" and for Elizabethan audiences the colour of "the other" (1989: 50). Therefore race becomes a relevant issue in the study of a character which bears a "political colour" and which evokes a series of conventions and attitudes which were part of the already known and the culturally given. Moreover, Othello's "political colour" reveals itself as being more complex than Aaron's blackness in *Titus Andronicus*; while Aaron is a plain villain who internalizes the essence of black Moor (black man, black soul) and defines himself against all the rest, Othello is more aptly defined as a colonial subject or "washed Ethiop" who, in the Duke's racist words, "is far more fair than black" (II, ii 289).[1] Racial prejudice is equally the centre around which Iago articulates Othello's fall. He exploits the politics of colour in the play until he makes Othello internalize the black stereotype which was part of his loan culture.

The evolution of black as a political colour is fascinating. Although as Jordan explains in *White over Black* English voyagers did not touch upon the shores of West Africa until 1550, and the first native West Africans probably did not appear in London until 1554, black was already a "partisan colour" before the 16th century. Its meaning included "deeply stained with dirt; soiled, dirty, foul. . . . Having dark or deadly purposes, malignant; pertaining to or involving death, deadly; baneful, disastrous, sinister etc." White, its direct opposite, conveyed purity, beauty and the principle of good versus evil (*Oxford Dictionary* 1978; rpt. 1933). The Church Fathers such as St. Jerome and St. Agustine, Jordan explains (1968: 7, 18), had already made the connection between blackness and sinfulness as they accepted the theory that Africans were descended from Ham's sons, an assumption which became universal in Christendom. Ham, "the accursed of God" for looking upon his father's nakedness as he lay drunk in his tent, was to be "a servant of servants." It was traditionally assumed that his dark skin marked and singled him out so that he could be recognized. The dark skin of the Negro becomes, as Sir Thomas Browne explains, "more than aesthetically displeasing; it becomes the symbol and the product of a moral taint as well" (quoted in Tokson 1982: 11). As if this mark of blackness was not enough to distinguish Ham's progeny, it was believed that Ham failed to teach his offspring any of the religious or social values held by his faith. Hence his sons, and the sons of his sons, degenerated into barbarism (Hodgen, quoted in Tokson 1982: 13). An alternative theory explained the curse of blackness as the result of Ham's disobeying Noah's commandment to his sons not to copulate with their wives out of reverence for and fear of God. But Ham, who knew that the first-born after the flood would inherit the dominion of the earth, had sex with his wife in order to dis-inherit the offspring of his other two brothers. As a punishment for his disobedience, Hakluyt writes in his *Principal Navigations*, God willed that a "son should be born whose name was Chus, who not only itself, but all his posteritie after him should be so blacke and loathsome, that it might remain a spectacle of disobedience to all the world. And of this blacke and cursed Chus came all these blacke Moors which are in Africa" (quoted in Tockson 1982: 14).[2]

When the English first started their voyages to Africa and encountered real Africans they found a referent and a recipient of blackness with all its negative connotations. As their accounts reveal, English travellers found no difficulty in further filling out the details and circumstances in which a people was cursed. Their theories, like those of their predecessors, clearly presented God's curse as having become attached to a race whose members could be

met with in 1578 in English cities with greater frequency. To the surprise of the English—and as if to invalidate the naturalistic theory which explained blackness as a consequence of exposure to the sun—the Africans brought to England had the ability to communicate their blackness to their offspring, even if they took fair English women as wives (Newman 1987: 146). This "natural infection" peculiar to the Africans had generated alarm by the end of the 16th century. Queen Elizabeth began to be discontented at the "great number of Negars and Blackamoors which . . . are crept into this realm," and in consequence issued two edicts in 1599 and 1601 in which she commanded that the infidels should be "discharged out of Her Majesty's dominions" (quoted in Jones 1971a: 20). The Queen complained about the great number of Africans, and about the fact that they were infidels, but perhaps more relevant to our topic is the fear of that "infection of blackness" latent in her words. "There are of late," wrote Elizabeth, "divers blackmoores brought into this realme, of which kinde of people there are allready to manie, considering howe God had blessed this land with great increase of people of our own nation" (quoted in Newman 1987: 148). These words reveal what we can call "the sexual bias" of the expulsion, and the fear of miscegenation —traditionally considered to be one of the causes of the lowering of the physical and mental standards (Fanon 1967: 120). Linked with the fear of miscegenation is the belief that, as George Abbot wrote in 1599, "the monsters of Africa . . . were bred when contrary kindes have coniunction the one with the other" (quoted in Jones 1971b: 20); a belief which, at least unconsciously, ties together miscegenation and monstrosity.

It seems, therefore, that as England widened its horizons through new expeditions to Africa, the traditional associations of blackness as being at the heart of Africanness were reaffirmed. In all these explorations abroad, England remained in the privileged centre. For, as Edward Said explains, "even as Europe moved itself outwards, its sense of cultural strength was fortified" (1979: 117). Travel books, from Herodotus and Pliny to Mandeville, Hakluyt, Thomas Windham, and Leo Africanus offered the Elizabethan reading public an imaginative "monstrous literature" which narrated their encounters with the Africans. They described men that had "neither nose nor nostrils, but the face all full. Others that have no upper lip, they are without tongues, and they speak by signs, and they have but a little hole to take their breath at .." (Pliny, quoted by Jones 1971a: 5). As they described their monstrous physical qualities, they constructed the Africans' "monstrous mores."[3] In an account by Herodotus we find that, along with the better known custom of anthropophagy, Africans "are all inveterate

conjurers, and given to the black art" (quoted in Jones 1971a: 4). Dark-skinned people are irresponsible and lustful, as can be seen in the casualness with which the fish-eating Ichthyophagi—as described in Waterman's *Fardle* (1555)— "fall upon their women" (quoted in Jones 1971a: 7). In the opinion of an Elizabethan traveller, John Lok, Negroes are "a people of beastly living, without a God, law, religion, or commonwealth" (quoted in Jones 1971a: 12). Leo Africanus' *Geographical History of Africa*, which was translated by Pory in 1600, is reputed to have dispelled the image of monsters from a great part of Africa. Leo, indeed, describes the Moors, for example, as "devout, valiant, patient, courteous, hospitall, and as honest in life and conuersation as any other people. . . . They are reported likewise to be most skilful warriors, to be valiant, and excellent louers and practisers of all humanitie" (quoted in Whitney 1922: 481). But while Leo recorded the humanity and positive qualities of some of the Moors, he also presented the Elizabethan reading public with what would become one of the most characteristic features of the Moor. Some of these Negroes, as Leo specified, are extremely jealous of the chastity of their wives: "For by reason of jealousy you may see them daily one to be the death and destruction of another, and that in such savage and brutish manner that in this case they will show no compassion at all" (quoted in Jones 1971a: 25). Although Leo Africanus is talking of the Numidians, soon enough not only the Numidians but the inhabitants of "the Southern Nations, and such as dwell in hot regions," (quoted by Campbell 1961: 150-51) were being described as very jealous, as Robert Tofte wrote in 1615 in his *Blazon of Jealousie*, the most complete study of jealousy during the Renaissance.

   In all these definitions, Africans, whether white or black Moors, are transformed into what Said terms "Platonic images" (1979: 36). As viewed by the Europeans, they seem to have a stable and unchangeable essence which the travellers capture in final and definitive descriptions. Sentences in European accounts of Africans are declarative and profess to be self-evident; the tense they employ is the "timeless eternal" (Said 1979: 72). Throughout the travel narratives of this literature of the monstrous it becomes manifest that, as Said remarks, knowledge about the other creates "the other" (1979: 40). Instead of bridging the cultural distances between Europe and Africa, travel literature seemed to emphasize the differences between western thought—the familiar—and African culture—the strange, the alien. The sense of "difference" inherent in travel books confirmed Europe's hegemony and superiority. Information about the other not only created the other but was transformed into more power over the other—as was confirmed shortly

after England's first encounter with the Africans with the start of slaving voyages such as Sir John Hawkins' (1562, 1564 and 1567). Ready to devour the monstrous tales that abounded in the travellers' accounts, the Elizabethans may well have preferred the fixity of texts to the more elusive and direct encounter with the Africans whose number was increasing in Europe towards the end of the century. We could say further that Elizabethans would develop with respect to Africans what Said calls "a textual attitude to life" which dispensed them from having to make an encounter with the real (1979: 93).

II. FROM MOOR TO OTHELLO

The audience experiences such a textual attitude to life during the first scene of the play when Othello's appearance is delayed. Such delay, as Newman explains, awakens in the audience shared prejudices against the Moors, especially in the visions of carnal love Iago so vividly describes (1987: 151). All throughout Act I, sc. i and most of I, ii, Othello is presented as an abstraction which impersonates—like a Platonic essence—all the vices traditionally associated with the Moor. In Iago's words he is a "lascivious Moor" (I, i, 125), and the target of all kind of animal imagery which emphasizes his bestiality and lack of restraint. Iago stresses the negative impact of the animalistic metaphors with the use of colours, "black ram"/"white ewe" and their connotations: "an old black ram/Is tupping your white ewe" (I, i, 88-89); "you'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse" (I, i, 110-111); "your daughter/and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs" (I, i, 115-116). Othello and Desdemona's elopement is thus reduced and represented through powerful expressionistic images which confirm that when talking about the Negro, as Fanon remarks, "everything takes place on the genital level" (1967: 157). Cunningly, Iago awakens the ghost of the bestial sexuality attributed to the Negro, as well as the delicate issue of miscegenation or the "infection of blackness" which had come to disturb the Queen towards the end of the 16th century.

Brabantio completes the picture of the Moor in I, i and I, ii as an "inveterate conjurer," a "bondslave and pagan" who had charmed his daughter (I, ii, 63; I, iii, 59-60). His claim that Othello had used magic immediately places the African character in the kingdom of otherness where he belongs as a barbarian and outsider. Brabantio's words take Othello back to the fixity of the pages where he can be fully known and interpreted. For

Brabantio, Othello is, as Caliban was in Prospero's eyes, "a thing" (I, ii, 71). After the images of bestiality which have been associated with Othello, his marriage would seem to the audience as gross and repulsive as a hypothetical union (or rape) between the abhorred Caliban and Miranda. Othello's intention to marry Desdemona and therefore secure a position in the Venetian oligarchy is also seen by Brabantio as an inversion of order, as a nonsense world with black over white, to use Jordan's words. "For," as he explains, "if such actions may have passage free,/ Bondslaves and pagans shall our statesmen be" (I, ii, 98-99). For Iago and Brabantio, Othello represents an unnatural choice, "a gross revolt" for a modest maid who had "shunned /The wealthy curl'd darlings" of Venice (I, ii, 68). For them Desdemona herself has "erred/Against all the rules of nature" (I, ii, 100-101). A nature, we could add, which is a fully ideologized concept, an ideological construct, fully instrumental and conducive to maintaining the purity of the Venetian oligarchy. Iago's and Brabantio's representation of Othello is a paradigmatic example of how a character is fully dissected, reduced and understood in terms of and as just another version of the well-known features of the African. Their descriptions of Othello further illustrate the importance of the concept of fixity in the ideological construction of "otherness" (Bhabha 1994: 66). In fact Jean-Paul Sartre equated colonial power with the capacity to impose fixity upon an otherwise fluid subjectivity (Pease 1991: 114). Venice, as Iago and Brabantio demonstrate, needs this "colonial discourse" in order to articulate the forms of difference and so exercise colonial power. The stereotype becomes in these pages the repeated, unchanging formula which controls reality and immediately domesticates the unknown and re-establishes a threatened order.

In fact, Brabantio's attitude towards Othello is comparable to Venice's attitude towards its colonial subjects. Venice is in the 16th century a colonial power which possesses an unstable hold in the East which it has to defend against the feared and powerful Turks. As a colonial power, Venice has what could be termed a "double nature": it both includes and excludes its aliens. Venice moves between cultural pluralism and a more limited, clearer definition of its social, racial and political identity (D'Amico 1991: 163). It appears as an open community for the purposes of war but remains closed at the level of local politics and the more conservative sense of "the family." Othello, as a subject assimilated to superior western culture, is viewed as a useful Caliban; he can be instrumentalized in order to secure Cyprus against the ever present menace of the Turks, but remains an alien when he intends to marry white Desdemona. This is precisely Brabantio's double vision of

Othello. Othello is on one hand a civilized Christian citizen and a pliant servant to the Venetian State, and Brabantio, as we hear in Othello's speech, "loved" him, oft invited him," and asked him to tell the story of his life (I,iii, 128). Here Othello's difference or ethnicity does not appear threatening. It seems that when Othello narrates "the story of his life" his blackness dissolves, or at least Brabantio is able to see beyond it and envision a landscape of wildness and exoticism which is attractive and stands sufficiently far removed from civilized Europe. Othello's "ethnic tales" reveal themselves as aspects of that "tamed" ethnicity which is so appealing to the Venetians (including Desdemona). Othello's difference becomes extremely menacing, however, when Brabantio views him as a potential husband for Desdemona. In that case Othello reverts to being a pagan and slave—a mere instance of the stereotype (Singh 1994, 289). Brabantio's is another case of what Mannoni terms "Prospero's complex," which he defined as "the sum of those unconscious neurotic tendencies that delineate at the same time the 'picture' of a paternalistic colonial and the portrait of 'the racist whose daughter has suffered an [imaginary] attempted rape at the hands of an inferior being'" (quoted in Fanon 1967: 107).

While Iago and Brabantio openly express their visions of Othello, Shakespeare provides the audience with enough cultural clues to recognize in him "the Moor's" most common features. In this way, the audience becomes an active participant in the creation of what is automatically viewed as "the voice of common sense."

Surprisingly, however, our first glimpses of Othello in person in I, ii challenge "the textual attitude to life" Iago and Brabantio so forcefully contrived as if "the other" were not entirely knowable; as if there were further difference within difference. It immediately becomes clear that there were gaps in Iago's and Brabantio's representation of Othello as "the Moor" as soon as Othello appears talking to Iago in I, ii. Othello is no Aaron, no vice taken out of a morality play; he is self-restrained—as his encounter with Brabantio demonstrates—and self-assured. He knows his own value and is confident that his life and existence will deconstruct the fixity of stereotype Brabantio imposes on him: "My services which I have done the signiory/Shall out-tongue his complaints" (I, ii, 18-19). Actions and real life, Othello feels, will conquer words or the textual attitude to life he, as an African, has to face. Othello, his name, his social usefulness, and the story of his life—a narrative supposedly told from the point of view of "the other"—will deconstruct the image of "the Moor," and allow him to make the transition from Moor to Othello.

But who is Othello? He appears in the play as a colonial subject who has absorbed European culture and morality, and has therefore domesticated the wildness implicit in his origins. He has also expelled from his personality the menacing aspects of the stereotype of the African such as lasciviousness, lust—as he makes clear before the Duke and the Senators (I, iii, 261-264)—and jealousy—as Desdemona confirms in III, iv, 30-31. Fully immersed in European culture, for Othello the Turk is "the other." Although he is in the liminal position of those accepted but not welcome in the Venetian oligarchy, he has become, with the limitations specified above, an "honorary white" (Loomba 1989: 48). While he feels at ease within his adoptive culture, his own African culture remains absent, or rather represents one of the "stressed absences" in the play. The handkerchief he confides to Desdemona as a family present is the only repository of his own history in the play, a part of the past which represents itself without resorting to language. Apart from the handkerchief, Othello appears as the perfect "mimic man" or colonial subject who has assimilated the quintessential western culture. As Draper has demonstrated, Othello's references are classical and Christian. It is indeed ironic that words like devil and hell (which we can identify as the traditional semantic field reserved for black characters and for infidels in general in medieval English drama) are more frequent in *Othello* than in any other play (Draper 1966: 172). These are part of what may be termed "the conditions of visibility" of the black character in the white text. Othello has to impress upon everyone, as Draper implies, the fact that he was no unbeliever so that his dubious or "obscure" past will be fully obliterated or "forgiven" by the audience. Othello's cultural references at this early —and optimistic— stage of the play would confirm the open nature of the metropolis and western culture in general. A liberal education, the play seems to imply, does indeed free the individual from the great limitations of time, space, class, and, we may add, race. The play, nevertheless, will show quite the opposite. Race is indeed a more problematic category than any of the other variables, and not at all a movable category even in the Renaissance. As *Othello* will demonstrate, the self-fashioning peculiar to the Renaissance is limited for the black man.

But the infinite possibilities of self-fashioning—if we understand by the term the assimilation of Othello to Venetian mores, habits and religion—are manifest in the narration of his autobiography before the Duke, Brabantio, and the rest of the Senators. As an exercise of self-representation, the autobiography is another instance of tamed difference, of a kind of ethnicity which is appealing to his Venetian listeners. Since Othello has to textualize

himself and his journey from the wilderness of Africa to the superior European culture in order to become an acceptable and civil character, he only has to reproduce the most familiar images of European travel narratives and colonial discourse when dealing with the African. In this way he can establish an insurmountable barrier between the monsters in Africa and his civilized self. His autobiography thus turns into a travel narrative which echoes other narratives such as Pliny's, Herodotus', Mandeville's, and other "racial encounters" such as Anthony and Cleopatra's. As in the texts of his predecessors, the gap between the European —or Europeanized— and the African is widened; as is the case in their texts, in Othello's narrative "stressed absences" also appear. We do not hear about the nobility, the civility and hospitality of certain African kings. Instead we get the most common features of the Elizabethans' image of Africa and its monstrous wonders. Africa, in Othello's words —as in the words of any other western traveller— is reduced to a land populated by "the Cannibals that each other eat,/The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads/Do grow beneath their shoulders" (I, iii, 142-43).

Rather than reveal Othello's origins, his tale demonstrates, as critics such as Newman (1987: 150) and Singh (1994: 288) explain, that Othello has no access to his past except through a borrowed language and its colonial discourse. Othello does not reveal his origins any more than the travellers' tales revealed the real nature/s of the Africans. He simply reproduces his identity as an unchangeable Platonic essence, as Said would say. The tale also reveals Othello's narrative position as a subject immersed in western European culture looking like a curious traveller at the object of his observation, the African, from his western ideological position. In his narration the "other" is tamed and isolated in the same way that Othello himself has been domesticated and accepted into Venetian society. The tale does not add anything new to the traditional image of Africa, and in this way reaffirms the familiar. At the same time, Othello's narrative eases European conscience as if Africa were already known and essentialized once and for all. Equally reassuring in the ears of the Venetians is the sense of progression toward purification implicit in the word "pilgrimage" with all its connotations of a journey to a centre of religious cult. In this light, Othello's autobiography stands as the conversion narrative of a man who started in darkness and has reached the light.

Othello's is therefore a conversion narrative at the level of culture and religion and at the level of language. Unlike Caliban, Othello does not use language to curse. He has learnt the white man's language and explicitly pos-

sesses the world vision expressed and implied in that language. To speak the Venetians' language is to take on a world vision and a culture, as Fanon would say (1967: 38). What is surprising about Othello's tale is that he is emphasizing two different positions: he is on one hand emphasizing his diffe-rence in order to win Desdemona and satisfy her appetite for marvellous tales, while at the same time he is asserting through a tranquilizing narrative his assimilation into white society and culture. Sensitive to his listeners—and the Europeans' appetite for monstrous literature and unusual scenes—Othello gives Desdemona and the rest of the Venetian Notables what they expect: dif-ference wrapped up in the familiar sameness. He just pours out the stereoty-pes of the traditional travel narrative into the ears of an insatiable Desdemona.

By the end of the scene, the Duke sanctions Othello and Desdemona's union and bids Othello to leave for Cyprus immediately. Othello has been able to impose a fluid subjectivity on the straitjacket of the stereotype of the "Moor," and emerges as a triumphant character. As the play proceeds, howe-ver, he will never again be seen in control of his own subjectivity nor of the two halves which make up his personality: a European, an African, "two souls," as W. E. B. Du Bois would say, "two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (1989: 3). While it is Othello who is able to blend his "twoness" by means of his narration, it will be Iago who cleaves an unbridgeable gap between the terms of this "twoness." Fully cognizant of the disruptive potential of Othello's two "warring ideals," Iago is going to build the tragedy of Othello on his schizophrenic personality. For Othello, full assimilation into Venetian society and culture implies looking at himself through the eyes of others, as Du Bois would say (1989: 3), and seeing himself as a lustful, conjuring and deeply jealous pagan Moor. Iago will gradually destroy Othello's confidence as a European until only his Africanness remains. But for a "washed Ethiop" or mimic man like Othello, Africanness means savagery, that world full of cannibals and monstrous men from which he providentially escaped. The Venetian gaze deprives Othello of his humanity until it reaches his alleged wild nature. Othello's assimilation to Venetian society implies self-annihilation. Through Iago's agency, Othello will cease to be himself and will become "the Moor."

III. FROM OTHELLO TO MOOR

Stephen Greenblatt has termed Iago's attitude towards Othello as "colonial" (1980: 233), a most fitting term to explain the way Iago takes possession of Othello's mind in a series of scenes from III, iii onwards. Greenblatt uses the term within a larger context referring to improvisations of power. He starts with a discussion of the Spaniards' manipulation of the native Lucayans' religious beliefs to their advantage. Greenblatt, however, does not study the obvious racism which makes Iago consider Othello "an erring barbarian," nor does he analyse how colonial power intersects with racism. Patricia Parker also uses the term "colonial" when she explains how Othello's ear is poisoned, "occupied," or "colonized" (1994: 99). The reference appears as another instance of the homoerotic imagery which is so insistent throughout the play.

Peculiar to this taking possession or devouring of Othello, we would add, is the fact that it is not forced or violent, as Prospero's possession of Caliban in *The Tempest* is. Othello manifests his willingness that it be so when in III, iii, he binds himself to Iago in a "mock marriage" ("I greet my love,/Not with vain thanks but with acceptance bounteous" III, iii, 469-70). Iago's words, "I am your own for ever" (III, iii, 80) sound indeed too ironic at a point when Othello, in the face of Iago's manipulation of trifles into evidence, has given himself up to Iago's designs and starts to be Iago's representation. As a result Othello will not be able to see himself as an individual but as the incarnation of a stereotype. Iago fashions his construct or representation of Othello not by attributing a lustful, bestial and uncontrollably jealous type of behaviour to him, but rather by mimicking the mind and reasoning attributed to the traditional stage Moor, as if he were trying to awake a dormant and monstrous side in Othello. Iago, as Othello remarks, "echoes" him: "By heaven, he echoes me,/As if there were some monster in his thought/Too hideous to be shown" (III, iii, 106-8). Through this "echoing" Iago places Othello in another "monster narrative" which is similar to the narrative of the men whose heads grow beneath their shoulders, but not quite the same. Iago's is the narrative of the monster "within," as he tells his master: "O, beware, my lord, of jealousy!/It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock/The meat it feeds on" (III, iii, 165-67). Othello's role in Iago's narrative is defined by his colour. Men, according to Iago, "should be what they seem" (III, iii, 126). Othello, the Moor, should be what he seems: an erring barbarian capable of the most astonishing cruelties, since the blackness without is only an instance of the darkness within. Iago's main strategy is therefore a strategy of reduction of the human, of the fluid personality of the individual to the workings of abstraction and stereotype.

The results of the strategy are immediate. Iago's poisoning of Othello is indeed much more effective than Othello's alleged enchanting of Desdemona. Indeed there is some sinister magic in the "words" of it. Othello adopts the role of a wronged Venetian husband who imposes fixity upon Desdemona and transforms her actions and words into the adulteress, "the weed" (IV, ii 67), the woman who has "whore" written on her most goodly book (IV, ii, 71-72). Just as Iago "devours" Othello, so Othello "devours" Desdemona, as Emilia explains through cannibalistic imagery: "[Men] are all but stomachs, and we are but food; / They eat us hungerly, and when they are full, they belch us" (III, iv, 104-105). But in condemning Desdemona, Othello condemns himself. Iago, fully aware of the fragile construction of Othello's character, knows that Othello's identity, his visibility and his humanity are dependent upon Desdemona's love (Loomba 1989: 59). We read how his soul is "enfettered to her love" (II, ii, 327), and how when he does not love her, "chaos is come again" (III, iii, 91-92). When his love fails through Desdemona's alleged frailty, Iago makes Othello return to his original blackness. But for this honorary white, blackness does not reveal itself as a triumphant realization as in *Titus Andronicus*, but rather as a sudden recognition of what Othello really is and represents in Venetian society: "Haply, for I am black / And have not those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have" (III, iii, 263-65). Paradoxical though it sounds, this is perhaps the moment when Othello has most fully immersed himself in white society. But total assimilation into western society implies seeing himself through the eyes of the Venetians, not as a defiant black soul, like Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, but as a "contrite" black soul which bears forms of residual paganism, lasciviousness and beastly behaviour.

Once he has fully adopted the perspective of his host culture, Othello acknowledges the "unnaturalness" of Desdemona's choice in marriage when "against all rules of nature," as Brabantio said, (I, i, 101), she chose Othello. Now it is Othello who echoes Brabantio's words in "and yet, how nature erring from itself" (III, iii, 27) without questioning the ideological location of what is natural. There is, therefore, no further question of what makes the union between a black man and a white woman unnatural. What is erased from "nature" in Othello's utterance, and in many others throughout the play (II, i, 248; II, i, 231-32), is the fact that it is instrumental and persuasive, it has status and establishes canons of taste and value (Said 1979: 19), that nature is completely "unnatural."

Once Othello has accepted the implications of what is natural and unnatural, he equally acknowledges the connotations of black and white as

understood by his host culture. Black appears now as a partisan colour, a symbol of baseness and evil, and a sign of danger and repulsion (Tokson 1982: 7). In this way, Desdemona's name is now begrimmed and black, like his own face (III, iii, 385-87); Othello conjures up "black vengeance from the hollow hell!" (III, iii, 447), and is careful to reserve a marble colour for the heaven he swears by (III, iii, 460). Othello's glamour as a victorious warrior vanishes and only his blackness, his real essence remains. Imprisoned in Iago's representation, Othello realizes that he lives in a monstrous world where "horned men" are monsters and beasts (IV, i, 62), and where women bear "whore" written on their fair paper (IV, ii, 71-73).

Othello the performer, engaged in the "perpetual reiteration of the norms of another culture" (Greenblatt 1980: 245), is then reduced to the role of the stage Moor. Although Othello intensely wished to distance himself from this stereotypical image and has taken every opportunity to deconstruct the stereotype through his fluid subjectivity, in III, iii, he begins his transformation into an abstraction. Iago, the stage manager, the reducer and the imposer of the fixity of stereotype directs Othello towards the traditional role of the villainous, jealous Moor. As Othello tells Desdemona in IV, ii, 54, he becomes a "fixèd figure," the kind of character who is what he seems and whose physical traits—assuming the tenets of traditional physiognomy—are a kind of writing which reveals a jealous and violent personality.

Peculiar to Shakespeare's representation of Othello's downfall and lapse into the stereotype is, however, a counter-representation of Othello's host culture. Othello, the violent Moor who is extremely jealous of his wife's chastity, is at the same time the colonial subject who has assimilated the role of the Venetian husband who has been wronged by an erring, now "blackened" wife. The handkerchief Iago places in Cassio's hands and which plays such a crucial role in the transformation of Othello into a stage Moor has a double reading as well. It can be viewed as bearing some private significance given the family history implicit in it, but it can also be taken as an index of Othello's adoption of a borrowed culture. In *cinquecento* Venice, as Newman remarks, the possession of the handkerchief was proof of adultery (1987: 155). Othello, bestowed with the power of life and death over his wife, had the right to carry out the penalty for adulterers. In mid-sixteenth century, George Joye called for a return to the Old testament and wrote: "God's law . . . is to punish adultery with death for the tranquility and common wealth of His Church" (quoted by Greenblatt 1980: 247). Whatever representation or performance Othello chooses, it will bring about similar consequences. There is no option for Othello: if he is to act as a white man,

the wronged Venetian husband has to clean and restore his honor and kill Desdemona. If he is to act like a jealous Moor, he will have to sacrifice Desdemona too. The two possibilities are one and the same. Shakespeare subtly reminds the reader of the savagery or monstrousness implicit not only in the alien, but in the most deeply ingrained Christian *mores*.

Interestingly, Othello is judged not as the supposedly wronged Venetian husband but as the cruel, unrestrained and jealous Moor. If Othello, as the rest of the characters remark, is fully transformed, he is not viewed as the mistaken Venetian husband but as the traditional "Moor" whose malignity has finally crept up to the surface. Othello in fact loses his individuality and becomes "the Moor," a "dull Moor" and a "cruel Moor" in the last scene. We find that for Emilia he is "the black devil" (V, ii, 132). For Othello himself, he is the person "that was Othello" (V, ii, 284). Once he has lost Desdemona and his public side has vanished, he sees himself, echoing Brabantio's words, as a "cursèd, cursèd slave" (V, ii, 287). Reduced to the base role of a slave, of "the other," Othello does not seek to rebel against the order which has "reduced" and savaged his humanity. Nothing awaits him but his destiny as a damned soul, the process of cleansing the self involving, as it must, his own destruction: "Whip me, ye devils,/From the possession of this heavenly sight!/Blow me about in winds! roast me in sulphur!/Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire! (V, ii, 278-81). An interesting reference which in effect confirms that the "washing of the Ethiop" implies destruction.

The play opens with an "optimistic" autobiography in which Othello tries to harmonize his two souls as African and European, and it may be said that it closes in a similar way, although in a tragic tone. Othello—who is not in control of his biography—instructs those present on how they should "these unlucky deeds relate" (V, ii, 341). Othello's position as a Moor assimilated to a culture which deprives him of his humanity and isolates him in his blackness is manifest in his last speech, in which we can hear the double voice of a "schizophrenic hero." Othello, as Greenblatt (1980: 234) and Loomba (1989: 49) have explained, appears as both Christian and infidel, the Venetian and the Turk, the defendant of the state and its opponent. When faced with the choice, however, Othello, unlike Aaron, decides to kill "the other" in him, the Turk who has "traduc'd the state" (V, ii, 355), and immolates himself in the name of civilization.

Othello thus moves from the position of an "honorary white," a colonized subject existing on the terms imposed by white Venetian society and trying to internalize its ideology, to the position of a total outsider. As an outcast and a cursed slave Othello occupies the true position of "the other"

(Loomba 1989: 48). Ironically, it is precisely from his position as an outsider that he may be said to have fully assimilated the ideology of his adoptive culture and fulfilled his role. In this light Shakespeare presents the predictable trajectory of a "stage Moor" who lapses into stereotype unable to resist the "call of evil" supposedly implicit in the deeper impulses of his nature. In this sense Shakespeare can be read as validating the view that when one scratches the surface of an African one sees a mad, cruel and bestial Othello (Orkin 1987: 63).

However, I believe that Shakespeare's position is more complex. True, Shakespeare describes Othello as lapsing into stereotype, but he does so, as Loomba remarks, by "laying bare the process of construction of stereotype." This "laying bare" allows us to get to see barbarity, monstrousness and monstrous sexuality in a whole new light: not as natural or essential features of the black character, but as artificial and "ideological constructs" (Loomba 1989: 61). It is Iago, we would add, who is the key character in enabling us to see the stereotype in the making. Moreover, the play subverts our vision of what is natural and what is artificial in such a way that monstrousness and barbarity appear as features more suitable to the character who consciously constructs them rather than the character on whom they are projected. Instead of confining "monstrousness" to the African character, Shakespeare places it at the centre of civilized society. In this way the audience is forced to challenge the validity of interpreting the individual through the fixity of stere- otype and to ask themselves which world is more monstrous, the world sup- posedly populated by monsters and wonders or that other world which creates "green eyed monsters," horned men, and deprives the black character of his humanity. As D'Amico explains, Othello, who had survived the monsters in Africa is unable to survive the so-called civilized world (1991: 191) where monsters live "within." In fact, the cannibalistic tendencies Europe found and marvelled at when exploring the world of "the other," are present in its very self. Civilization, like jealousy, is "the monster which doth mock / The meat [the Othellos, we could add] it feeds on." In this light, *Othello* may well portray the mad Moor you get when you look beneath the skin of an African, but the Venetians —as represented in the play— confirm that when you look beneath the skin of an European you see the anatomy of a racist; a glimpse of the monster within.a

NOTES

1. All quotes from the play are taken from Gerald Eades Bentley's edition of *Othello* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958).

2. There was also a "naturalistic" theory which maintained that the Negro's blackness was due to his exposure to the hot sun.

3. See Jack D'Amico for an interesting and detailed explanation of the meanings and implications of "monstrous" (1991: 179-80).

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