“I KISSED THEE ERE I KILLED THEE”: PERFORMING RACE AND GENDER IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE’S *OTHELLO* AND RICHARD WRIGHT’S *NATIVE SON*

A Thesis
by
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ABSTRACT

"I KISSED THEE ERE I KILLED THEE": PERFORMING RACE AND GENDER IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S *OTHELLO* AND RICHARD WRIGHT'S *NATIVE SON*" (August 2012)

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This thesis elaborates on the existing scholarship connecting William Shakespeare's *Othello* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and consequently addresses Wright's direct Shakespearean allusions in addition to the common themes and questions the works share, in particular, the performative nature of race and gender. The main parallels critics draw between the characters in the texts—Othello/Bigger and Desdemona/Mary—demonstrate how each "actor" deviates from his or her normative role, and the result of his or her deviance. Judith Butler's work on performance offers a basis for examining the theatricality of both texts, particularly with respect to Wright's use of theatrical tropes, as well as his allusions to acting, the stage, and the various roles humans play. Thus, in a world as a stage, with people as players, what one "sees" says little about reality or truth. Both Shakespeare and Wright make use of this theme throughout their work, but most certainly in *Othello* and *Native Son*, where the authors explore in-depth the questions of race, gender, and performativity.

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Introduction

In act 3 scene 3 of William Shakespeare's *Othello*, a once confident, honored "black Moor" unravels at Iago's hands and his "worst of words" (135). Overcome with jealousy, anger, and grief at Desdemona's supposed infidelity, Othello yells, "I'll tear her all to pieces" (431); "O, blood! blood! blood!" (451). Later in act 4 scene 1, when he has received his "ocular proof," Othello exclaims, "I will chop her into messes!" (193). There are blatant discrepancies between this violent intent and Desdemona's actual murder, in which Othello smothers her in their bedroom, but although Othello never fulfills his original intention to chop Desdemona into messes, modern readers who are familiar with Richard Wright's *Native Son* may find themselves eerily reminded of Bigger Thomas's dismemberment of Mary Dalton.

In the fall of 1943, Wright watched a performance of *Othello* in New Jersey, with Paul Robeson, whom Wright deemed "the outstanding Negro actor" of the day, in the lead role ("Portrait of Harlem" 145). During intermission, Wright demonstrated intimate knowledge of the play. In *Anger, and Beyond: The Negro Writer in the United States*, Herbert Hill quotes Saunders Redding's recollection of this night, emphasizing Wright's anger over his friend's lack of insight during the performance:

> I remember Dick from the fall of 1943. We met at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, where Paul Robeson was doing Othello. During the course of the performance it was noticeable that Robeson was drooling, spitting really . . . and one of the men criticized Robeson for losing his saliva. Dick got very mad

> about this and said, "Don't you know that Othello was an epileptic, and this is a conscious, a purposeful thing; this is part of the role?" (200)

The detail Wright notes in the above recollection is in act 4 scene 1 of *Othello*, when Cassio witnesses Othello's rage over Desdemona's infidelity. Iago explains Othello's state by telling Cassio that Othello "is fall'n into epilepsy" (4.1.61). Coincidently, this scene, one that Wright was intimately familiar with, is also the scene in which Othello expresses his urge to chop Desdemona into messes. Consequently, this thesis explores parallels such as these between *Othello* and *Native Son*, and addresses Wright's direct Shakespearean allusions in addition to the common themes and questions the works share, in particular, the performative nature of race and gender.

Deeply influenced by Shakespeare, whom he began reading during his early literary apprenticeship in Memphis, Wright cites the playwright throughout his work. Although Redding's anecdote indicates Wright's familiarity with *Othello*, Wright "also saw New York productions of *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *The Tempest*" (Dick 8). That Wright made the effort to see these productions is not surprising considering he read Shakespeare from his youth to his premature death in 1960. Moreover, Wright included "Shakespeare" as a necessary "book" to take with him when he moved to France in 1947, as Michel Fabre notes in *Richard Wright: Books and Writers* (143). Fabre also lists some of the allusions to Shakespeare in Wright's epigraphs, prefaces, section titles, and other written material:

> *The Outsider*, Book IV "Despair": "The wine of life is drawn and the mere lees / Is left this vault to brag of" (*Macbeth*). . . . *The Long Dream*, Part III, "Waking Dream": "The dream's here still; even when I wake it is / Without me, as within me: not imagined." (*Cymbeline*). . . . Wright alluded to the

> Negro middle-class writers saying "if you prick me, I bleed; if you put fire to me, I burn; I am like you who exclude me" in "The Literature of the Negro in the United States." (144)

As these allusions suggest, Wright owned a number of books that were either editions of collected Shakespearean works, or scholarly criticism on Shakespeare's life and works. As Fabre notes, samples of these texts include *Complete Concordance, or Verbal Index to Words, Phrases and Passages in the Dramatic Works of Shakespeare*; *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*; *Tales from Shakespeare*; *A Life of William Shakespeare*; and *The Lion and the Fox: The Role of the Hero in the Plays of Shakespeare* (143-144).

Throughout his life, Wright was concerned with Shakespeare as a playwright as well as his body of work. After seeing a production of *The Tempest* in 1945, he wrote in his journal:

> By God, how Shakespeare haunts one! How much of our speech comes from him. . . . One is awed. And feels afresh the power of the spoken word and the power of the living image on the stage, and again I longed to try to do plays, dramas. How bleak I felt in my own life after seeing *The Tempest*! Yet how possible it felt that I could do such as that! I recalled when I last saw Hamlet and told my friends that some day I'd make thunder like that on the stage, and by God, not a year had passed before *Native Son* was on that very same stage. (qtd. in Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* 269)

Additionally, Wright wrote in his journal his regret that he could not "write in serenity, like Shakespeare" (qtd. in Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* 272). These entries demonstrate Wright's

"imagined" Shakespeare, and his desires to become like the playwright who created thunder on the stage.

Wright's attempts to echo Shakespeare's thunder are mainly limited to the stage adaption of *Native Son*, co-written with Paul Green, as well as an unpublished adaptation of the French play, *Papa Bon Dieu*, titled *Daddy Goodness*. The process of adapting *Native Son* to stage sheds light on Wright's purpose for Bigger Thomas, as the most difficult part of the process was determining "what significance to attach to Bigger's fate" (Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* 207). In a fascinating exploration of this problem, Fabre explains that director Orson Welles, Green, and Wright disagreed on "the vision" of the play. Although Wright worked with Green on a new version of Bigger, Fabre notes that Wright actually preferred a version closer to the intent of the novel. The play is a reflection of these conversations, having only ten scenes, all intended to "illustrate the psychological evolution of the hero as economically as possible" (*Unfinished Quest* 208). As Fabre points out, Bigger's "fate alone creates the drama" (*Unfinished Quest* 208).

In addition, scholars note that in Wright's journalism he frequently demonstrates a familiarity with the conventions of the Elizabethan stage. In these pieces, he "uses 'TIME,' 'CHARACTER,' 'PLACE,' 'SCENE,' and other conventional dramatic devices to frame his writing" (Dick 7). Also, Wright consistently evokes fate, a common trope in Renaissance literature. For example, *Cymbeline*, a Shakespearean play that Wright quotes from directly in his last published novel, *The Long Dream*, conveys how characters often play out the parts given to them by higher powers such as fate, while understanding very little about what is happening to them. Within the Shakespearean plays Wright alludes to, fate, as it relates to the protagonist's agency, is a common trope. In *Native Son*, both the novel and the stage

adaptation, Wright's "tragedy" parallels Elizabethan tragedy; like Othello, Bigger is "the hapless actor in [his] fateful drama" ("How Bigger Was Born" 427). Moreover, *Cymbeline*, *Othello*, and *Hamlet,* to name a few, are works that examine the interpretation of what is heard but not seen—what constitutes evidence. In the stage adaptation of *Native Son* the audience does not see Bigger's dismemberment of Mary Dalton; they only hear the furnace turn off and on. Thus, tragic protagonists for both Wright and Shakespeare are subject to pieces of "evidence" as interpreters, and their interpretation of these objects informs their fate.

In this respect, Wright's most direct allusion to Shakespearean drama is the symbol of the indicting handkerchief in *Othello*. This symbol is also present in *Cymbeline*: Posthumus receives a bloody cloth, signifying that his order to murder Innogen has been fulfilled. After receiving the handkerchief, he berates husbands like himself for murdering wives "for wrying but a little" (5.1.5). These soiled objects are evidence—proof—to confirm the perspectives and perceptions of the players. In Wright's literature, the soiled handkerchief appears most revealingly in "Long Black Song." Wright's short story, published in *Uncle Tom's Children* in 1938, reconfigures the Iago-Desdemona-Othello tragedy, positioning Silas (Othello) against a travelling white gramophone salesman antagonist (Iago) through the perspective of Sarah (Desdemona), Silas's wife whom the white man assaults and sleeps with in the couple's home. In an explicit parallel to *Othello,* when Silas comes home from a business transaction in a neighboring town he notices not only the white man's gramophone, hat, and pencil but "a man's handkerchief" lying conspicuously in their bed. For Silas, the "white wad of cloth" which "hit the floor softly, damply" confirms his suspicions of Sarah's infidelity (144). He screams:

> The white folks ain never gimme a chance! They ain never give no black man a chance! There ain nothing in yo whole life yuh kin keep from em! They take yo lan! They take yo freedom! They take yo women! N then they take yo life! (152)

Silas's achievements as a successful businessman are impressive, but due to the oppressive "white" environment in which he lives his achievements go unnoticed. Reflecting on his rage after he finds the salesman's wet, soiled handkerchief in his bed, Sarah thinks, "Yes, she knew how Silas felt. Always he had said he was as good as any white man. He had worked hard and saved his money and bought a farm so he could grow his own crops like white men" (147). Similarly, after Silas kills the white man who returns to his home, as well as a handful of other whites who come to lynch him for killing their friend, he takes his own life: "Silas had killed as many as he could and had stayed on to burn and had stayed without a murmur" (156). Silas's choice of death and his relative "achievements" in society are more than coincidental, considering Wright's familiarity with *Othello*.

In both texts, the white handkerchief signifies deception. This symbol, used by both Shakespeare and Wright, encompasses the theme of theatricality and the performance of daily life. Therefore, an examination of performance as deception, a theme pertinent to the morality of the Renaissance stage, calls into question any sense of truth and reality for both the characters and audience. In the play adaptation of *Native Son*, Bigger sees himself in Mary's mirror, holding her dead body, but he does not recognize himself: "Don't you look at me—don't say I done it—I didn't, I tell you" (Green and Wright 449). This mirror is described in the stage directions as reflecting "only a vague blur of images" (447). Bigger cannot even "see" himself and his actions clearly—as he states later in the play, "Maybe

someone else did all that" (463). Here, Wright deliberately plays with the "unseen" and "evidence" in a similar fashion to Shakespearean drama. For example, when Desdemona claims to have seen Othello's "visage" in his mind, she assumes a de-robing of his "lined coat," his "trimmings," and a revelation of a *true* self or individual, separate from his identity as "the Moor" (2.3.250). This statement is ironic considering the probability, if not certainty, that the actor playing Othello would have been a white man in blackface. Desdemona continues: "And to his honors and valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate" (2.3.251-2). Audiences are left wondering exactly how and where Desdemona determines Othello's "quality," and if she sees Othello's true "visage," or has he fooled her by "seeming so" (2.3.249).

Despite the close parallels present throughout Wright's body of work, *Native Son* is the pinnacle of his Shakespearean allusions. The crux of both *Native Son* and *Othello* centers on whom to accuse: culture or the black protagonist? In both works, the three crucial structural elements include the protagonists' "blackness," their relationships to a "white" world, and, in particular, their relationships with "white" women. These structural elements are related to and dependent on one another. There are, of course, obvious differences in the respective tragedies. For example, in a near mirror image, *Othello* begins with a trial, while *Native Son* ends with one; moreover, Othello devolves in his relationships with others, especially with Desdemona, while Bigger evolves in his relationships, especially with Jan, Mary Dalton's communist boyfriend. These differences may help explain the lack of criticism exploring the parallels between the two works. Kenneth Kinnamon's "Richard Wright's Use of *Othello* in *Native Son*" remains one of the few pieces of literary criticism that deals directly with Wright's Shakespearean allusions in *Native Son*. Kinnamon asserts:

> Wright's selective and limited use of *Othello* did not extend to matters of structure or verbal allusion. The effect of the parallels noted above is to induce a certain emotional resonance rather than to construct a systematic allegorical scheme. But the parallels do exist and they are important. (359)

Wright's invocation of *Othello* throughout his work undoubtedly carries an emotional impact for readers familiar with Shakespeare's text, but the parallels between *Native Son* and *Othello*, as well as other Shakespearean works, are extensive enough to suggest significance beyond "emotional resonance."

Other scholars who do recognize Shakespeare's influence on Wright typically limit their connections to statements such as Stephen K. George's: "Mary's visage is covered by a pillow (oddly paralleling Othello's murder of Desdemona)" (500). Edward Kearns suggests that in *Native Son,* Wright inverts the story of the pitiable black victim through point of view in the "Fate" section: "One might imagine, for example, *Othello* with its plot intact, but sympathetically seen through the eyes of Iago" (147). However, in this parallel Kearns uses Shakespeare to illuminate *his* scholarship more than the plot of *Native Son*. James R. Andreas's "*Othello*'s African American Progeny" is perhaps the most developed discussion of the *Othello/Native Son* parallel, but Andreas includes *Invisible Man*, *The Dutchman*, and additional works to demonstrate *Othello*'s influence throughout twentieth century African American literature. For example, he mentions that "in *Othello* and *Native Son*, the citizens of Venice and Chicago are violently outraged at the respective murders of Desdemona and Mary Dalton," but Andreas evokes this parallel only as a contrast to the murder of Clay in *The Dutchman* (53).

These articles overlook numerous possible parallels between the texts, as noted above. Even the figures of Cassio and Jan may be effectively paralleled. As counterparts to Desdemona and Mary, both men represent a preferable union as they are white. Critic Arthur Little, Jr., has gone as far to argue that the relationship between Cassio and Desdemona is presented as "proper" and "perfect" (*Shakespeare Jungle Fever* 82). However, the parallel between Cassio and Jan prompts a different reading, as Wright obviously problematizes the idea of a "favorable" union between Mary and Jan through Jan's affiliation with communism. Similarly, Cassio is far from a perfect partner for Desdemona, especially considering Iago's account of Cassio's homoerotic seduction and violation of Iago: "Then [he would] kiss me hard, / As if he plucked up kisses by the roots / That grew upon my lips; laid his leg o'er my thigh, / And sigh, and kiss, and then cry. . ." (3.3.410-23). Overall, numerous parallels exist between the two texts that, when examined closely, illuminate both works, but these parallels have not been given detailed critical attention from scholars.

Direct allusions to *Othello* aside, Wright expresses a similar interest in the difference between playing a role and one's true "visage" in *Native Son*. As Wright asserts in "How Bigger Was Born," Bigger is more than a man who was never "happier than when he had someone cornered and at his mercy" (435). In an interview in 1945, Wright states, "In Bigger Thomas I was not trying to show a type of Negro, but even more than that—a human being reacting under pressure, reacting the only way he could because of this environment" (Kinnamon, *Conversations with Richard Wright* 84). Consequently, scholarly examinations of Bigger Thomas beg the question of a "Negro's role," as Shakespeare's *Othello* inarguably did for the role of "the Moor" three centuries earlier. Thus, tracing the consciousness that accompanies these "roles" and "acts" helps readers to grasp the subjectivity of Wright's

tragic protagonists, just as scholarly work on the performativity of Shakespeare's plays has illuminated certain elements of his work.

To add to existing scholarship, the first chapter of this thesis examines the protagonists' performances of race and gender and how performance theory similarly illuminates both texts. In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler suggests that Frantz Fanon's claim, "the black is not a man," is, in fact, a critique of black men's masculinity: "the implication of that formulation would be that no one who is not a 'man' in the masculine sense is a human" (13). In this statement, Butler ties the performativity of race to gender; both are oppressive in nature. Wright addresses this phenomenon in *Black Boy*, the stifling nature of "acting in conformity with what others expected of me even though by the very nature and form of my life, I did not and could not share their spirit" (37). Consequently, the performances of race and gender in *Othello*, and Wright's allusions to these representations in *Native Son*, can be similarly illuminated through Butler's work. Both Othello and Bigger are made to act "feminine," and these forced performances affect their violence towards Desdemona and Mary.

In chapter two, I explore the direct parallels between Desdemona and Mary, as well as their shared performances of gender and sexual desire. Using Butler's *Excitable Speech*, I examine speech, and how it plays into the performance of gender, as well as into Desdemona and Mary's respective deaths. In recent scholarship, Mary Dalton has been deemed the "nouvelle Desdemona," and her role in the protagonist's/anti-hero's demise is comparable to that of Desdemona's. One of the few critical pieces that explores this connection is Çiğdem Üsekes's "The New Desdemona: The White Liberal Woman in African-American Drama." Üsekes contrasts *Native Son*, *The Dutchman*, and *The Talking of Miss Janie* as three

prominent African-American plays that feature a "pivotal white female character" (33). However, *Othello* is only mentioned in the introductory paragraph, and not quoted from at all. In his analysis of *Native Son,* Üsekes concludes that the play "dramatizes the white liberal desire to undo the horrors of the past and the present but hints at its impossibility" (37). Yet, his characterization of Desdemona as "liberal" is not elaborated upon, nor are the descriptors he assigns to Mary Dalton: "naïve," "childish," "selfish," "superior," "spoiled," and even "political and social activist" (33-37). I expand upon these parallels and Desdemona's and Mary's performances of gender in this chapter.

Finally, the third chapter examines the murder scene in both *Othello* and *Native Son*. This analysis not only reveals Wright's most blatant allusions to *Othello*, but also how both scenes express Shakespeare's and Wright's shared interest in the performative nature of race and gender. I argue that a cultural fascination with interracial sex is similarly realized in both texts in the murder scenes. By the end of *Native Son*, Bigger is on trial for a "sex crime," even though he does not rape Mary Dalton. Similarly, when Othello goes on trial, the white men questioning him, Iago in particular, seem more concerned about his "tupping" of a "white ewe" than the marriage in question (3.3.401). Moreover, the audience's "gaze" subordinates the black protagonist as well as the white, female victim, thwarting Othello's and Bigger's efforts to gain power and masculinity through violent acts. This chapter examines these direct allusions, as well as the performative and climactic nature of the murder scenes in both texts.

The blatant parallels between Shakespeare's *Othello* and Wright's *Native Son* emphasize the importance of an intertextual examination of both texts. Both Shakespeare and Wright make use of the theme of performance throughout their work, but most specifically in

Othello and *Native Son*, where the authors explore in-depth the questions of race, gender, and performativity. Thus, an exploration of both *Othello* and *Native Son* through the theoretical perspective of theatricality and performance serves to emphasize the main parallels critics draw between the characters in the texts—Othello/Bigger and Desdemona/Mary—and how these parallels are significant in each "actor's" deviance from his or her normative roles. Moreover, drawing these parallels illuminates the theatricality of Wright's writing: his use of theatrical tropes, his allusions to acting, the stage, and the various roles we play, and his direct allusions to Shakespearean drama, with which he was intimately familiar.

Chapter One:

Performing Violent Masculinity in *Othello* and *Native Son*

"Nothing on earth, save perhaps religion itself, is more intriguing, more replete with the spirit of fun and adventure, of make-believe and illusion, of men and women giving bodily form and reality to their impulses and dreams than the theatre."
—Richard Wright, "What Do I Think of the Theatre?"

"All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages."
—William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

The two epigraphs above demonstrate Shakespeare's and Wright's shared interest in performance and theatricality, both in the theatre and in daily life. Wright, as evidenced in "What Do I Think of the Theatre," was more than familiar with the theatre, and recent scholarship has only begun to examine him as a playwright in conjunction with his career as a novelist, journalist, and poet. The following lines from Jacques's monologue in *As You Like It* were delivered in the early seventeenth century, but a similar worldview is undoubtedly expressed in Wright's body of work. In his youth, Wright struggled with his "part" as a black boy growing up in the Jim Crow South. As Bruce Dick asserts in "Forgotten Chapter: Richard Wright, Playwrights, and the Modern Theater," "Wright had been conditioned since his childhood to view the world theatrically" and this conditioning is evident throughout Wright's writing (3). In *Black Boy*, his autobiographical text, Wright consistently refers to the divide between his perceived identity and the *part* he had to *play*. A similar zeitgeist

infiltrated the culture of Renaissance England, a time in which the uneasy union between religion and politics had horrifying results, and class boundaries—blood and lineage—dictated marriage, wealth, and respect. Playing a normative part was a necessity for most British subjects.

In addition, French scholar Michel Fabre notes a similarity between the above epigraph from *As You Like It* and a poem Wright circulated among friends before publication. The poem, "I Have Seen Black Hands," represents "the stages of Afro-American experience, somewhat like Shakespeare's soliloquy, 'Seven Ages of Man'" (*Unfinished Quest* 99-100). This poem alludes to the less frequently quoted section of Jacques's speech, demonstrating the depth of Wright's familiarity with Shakespeare's work. Moreover, in the opening scene of *Native Son* the play, Bigger's mother sings, "We must make the run successful / From the cradle to the grave" (Green and Wright 14). This scene evokes Jacques's sentiment that the seven ages of man begin with "the infant" and end with a man "sans teeth, sans eyes, sans tastes, sans everything" (2.7.165). Whether this allusion is intentional or simply a shared sentiment, it is one of many examples of Wright's familiarity with Shakespeare's body of work.

Regardless, both Shakespeare and Wright demonstrate a shared interest in challenging the normative roles of race and gender throughout their work. This challenge is emphasized through theoretical perspectives that illuminate the performative nature of race and gender. Judith Butler's seminal text, *Undoing Gender*, provides a critical lens that illuminates these authors' shared interests, especially regarding their respective protagonists Othello and Bigger. As Butler explains, the forced performances that accompany race and gender give "rise to a physical violence that in some sense delivers the message of

dehumanization which is already at work in the culture" (25). She continues, ". . . it seems that violence emerges precisely as the demand to undo that legibility, to question its possibility, to render it unreal and impossible in the face of its appearance to the contrary" (35). These two observations apply to the questions of humanity, identity, and fate in both texts: in what ways are Othello and Bigger, Desdemona and Mary, dehumanized, and how does this dehumanization play into the acts of violence in both texts? Butler's observations also help to convey the critical questions both texts share: what significance should we attach to the protagonist's fate? How are these men "born"? What role does the protagonist play in his own demise? In answering these questions, both *Othello* and *Native Son* reveal how violence, race, and gender are linked in meaningful ways.

Because of the cultural chasm that stands between modern readers and *Othello*, it is difficult to contextualize race in the play; the terms and concepts that constituted race in Renaissance England are, as Michael Neill claims, "virtually beyond recovery" (383). Despite these difficulties, recent scholarship on *Othello* acknowledges that Othello's blackness exists in a "culture in which gradations of color stand for gradations of 'barbarity,' 'animality,' and 'primitive emotion'" (Neill 384). The "racial feeling" evident in the play is unavoidable, and Othello's performance as both a noble and monstrous Moor explores "human pigmentation as a means of identifying worth" (Orkin 188). However, Shakespeare subverts the typical role of the Moor in *Othello*, positioning Othello as the protagonist and Iago as the pronounced villain. In *Black Face, Maligned Race*, Anthony Gerard Barthelemy states, "Rather than playing the villain, a role that should be Othello's by dramatic convention and popular tradition alike, the valiant Moor becomes the center of the psychomachiac struggle between good and evil" (150). Moreover, Iago's rhetoric defines the

dimensions of Othello's racial inferiority. Othello lacks "manners," "beauties," and "sympathy" (2.1.224). However complex reading race in *Othello* may be, Shakespeare draws attention to performance and roles through his deconstruction of them.

As a text that is still performed, and a play Wright witnessed on stage, *Othello* offers utterances, objects, and actions that the characters couch in reference to normative performances of race and gender. Much like race, gender existed on a precarious continuum in Renaissance England and was determined through a variety of performed acts. Masculinity was a matter of degree. As Will Fisher argues in *Materializing Gender in Early Modern English Literature and Culture*, it was "crucially malleable and prosthetic" (34). The various prosthetic representations of gender in *Othello* are more than symbolic: the manipulation or removal of these objects reconstitutes a gendered body. Thus, Othello's valiant honors and badges are performances of masculinity. As Lee Edelman argues in the essay "The Part for the (W)hole," "the culturally institutionalized authority of the phallus . . . never fully distinguishes itself from the anatomical penis" (48). Othello's honor resides in his enactments of masculinity, his power beyond the emblematic indications of an anatomical penis.

In Elizabethan times, a white actor in blackface would have played Othello, and Desdemona would have been played by a boy actor, further problematizing gender roles. Race and gender did not exist in plain binaries in Renaissance England, and these continuums of power were played out on the stage. As Anthony B. Dawson states of Desdemona: "Desdemona's body, because it is also the boy actor's, will always remain a performing body" (35). Consequently, the complexity of reading race and gender in *Othello*

has warranted much critical debate, but an analysis of Othello's *performance* of race and gender allows for these complexities.

Othello is notably effeminized over the course of the play, which ends in a removal of his badges of honor. In an early discussion with Roderigo, Iago effeminizes Othello through the sentiment, "These Moors are changeable in their wills" (1.3.343-344). This inconstancy is clearly gendered in Renaissance literature, as women are consistently referred to as dark, foul, and untrustworthy (Daileader 14). It is this changeability, or inconstancy, that Desdemona is later killed over. Iago continues, "The Moor is of free and open nature," comparing him to an ass that will be led by the nose (1.3.390). Indeed, Othello is required to play the subservient, effeminate Moor to qualify his violent, masculine acts, as well as his marriage to Desdemona. His first performance occurs in act 1, scene 3, in which Othello addresses the court:

> Most potent, grave, and reverent signiors,
> My very noble and approved good masters:. . . .
> . . . Rude am I in my speech,
> And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace;
> For since these arms of mine had seven years' pith
> Till now some nine moons wasted, they have used
> Their dearest action in the tented field;
> And little of this great world can I speak
> More than pertains to feats of broils and battle,
> And therefore little shall I grace my cause
> In speaking for myself. (1.3.76-89)

Othello debases himself in this speech without reference to his race, although it is clear that his rude, or unsophisticated, speech is undermined within the rhetoric of his claims. As Barthelemy states:

> Although Othello intensely wishes not to be a typical stage Moor, he finds himself in exactly that position. He is the black man who provokes a crisis by his sexual relationship with a white woman. He must, therefore, immediately and uncompromisingly identify his state of subservience and remain there; by so doing, he at least can assuage one fear and dismiss one threat. (154)

Here, Othello is indeed "cunning," as Brabantio asserts, in his performance of a subservient Moor whose expertise and power is limited to violence.

Othello's manipulation of race performance is further emphasized in his account of winning Desdemona, an account in which Desdemona "devour[s] up [his] discourse" and hints at her interest in him by suggesting that he teach a friend to tell his story and "that would woo her" (1.3.127-69). He even admits that upon "this hint I spake" (165), and the Duke concludes that "this tale" would win his daughter too (170). Finally, Othello's tale is exotic and foreign in its content, but Desdemona credits his discourse and telling of the story. Thus, there is an immediate disparity between Othello's claim to "rude speech" in his courtroom performance and his account of winning Desdemona, which suggests that the typical role of the Moor is a subservient one.

As well as in his performances of race, Othello experiences a loss of agency in his role as husband. In "Impotence and the Feminine in *Othello*" James W. Stone points out that "the state of marrying involves a reversal of the expected gender roles between male general and female love" (51). As Iago puts it, "Our general's wife is now the general" (2.3.305).

Othello worries that if Desdemona is not "honest," then his "name" that is "as fresh as Dian's visage" will become as "begrimed and black" as his face (3.3.385-88). Thus, Desdemona has a perceived power over Othello that the white men do not. This power is especially emphasized in the contrast between Desdemona's blatant sexual desire and Othello's sexual anxiety.

Othello's expected performances of race and gender are contradictory, and Iago only exacerbates this confusion. However, Othello compensates through violent acts, or performances of masculinity. The alliance of violence with masculinity is clear throughout the play. In response to Roderigo's wish to drown himself, Iago admonishes him: "Come, be a man! Drown thyself? Drown cats and blind puppies" (1.3.333-34). For Iago, Roderigo's choice of suicide is feminine, or not violent enough. Of violence, Butler states that it is "a touch of the worst order, a way in which human vulnerability to other humans is exposed in its most terrifying way, a way in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another, the way in which life itself can be expunged by the willful action of another" (*Undoing Gender* 22). Because Othello is made vulnerable by the subservient role he is expected to play, he must, in turn, reassert himself through violence. After Iago tells Othello of Desdemona's infidelity, as revealed by Cassio in his sleep, Othello's first reaction is, "I'll tear her all to pieces" (3.3.432). Similarly, after Iago confirms Desdemona's infidelity through the handkerchief, Othello expresses his need to regain control through violence: "I will chop her into messes! Cuckold me!" (4.1.194).

These violent assertions most blatantly connect Othello to Bigger Thomas, a character written four centuries later. In both texts, the vivid images of violent dismemberment allow the black protagonists to become more of a "man," or a complete human being. Wright

vividly describes Bigger's mutilation of Mary in *Native Son*: "He got the hatchet, held the head at a slanting angle with his left hand and, after pausing in an attitude of prayer, sent the blade of the hatchet into the bone of the throat with all the strength of his body. The head rolled off" (92). In both texts, this type of violence is due to normative gender roles and expectations.

In *Black Boy*, Wright describes the necessity of figuring out how to "perform each act and say each word" (196). A failed performance had consequences, as Wright bluntly states in "How Bigger Was Born." Black men who could not perform the role of "black *boy*" were "shot, hanged, maimed, lynched, and generally hounded until they were either dead or their spirits broke" (437). Similar to Shakespeare's *Othello*, the pressure of the environment, or stage, in which Wright's black protagonists perform in is often too much to bear, and they "react" the only way a human can "because of this environment" (Kinnamon, *Conversations with Richard Wright* 84). In *Native Son*, Bigger acts out certain roles and wears certain masks to facilitate his mobility in the world; thus, much of the recent scholarship on *Native Son* illuminates the multi-faceted theatricality of Wright's writing. Just as *Othello* is a text with multiple levels of performance, *Native Son* has elicited scholarship on its literal, figurative, real, and imagined performances of race and gender.

Bigger performs race in an urban world of white racism, one that is easier for critics to contextualize than that of Shakespeare's England. Certainly, this world thwarts Bigger's search for expressive freedom—a world that Wright knew intimately. Bigger proclaims that his actions are "hard" and "blind" gestures against a harsh and "unseeing" world (*Native Son* 388). Critics must address this harsh world's role in Bigger's actions and performances. Indeed, Bigger's social environment affects critics' interpretation of his humanity: he either

transcends his environment, or becomes the stereotype used to trap and control him, and is consequently indicted and killed. Either way, critics such as Alan W. France agree that "the exposed presence of *Native Son* is the dialectical struggle between Bigger Thomas's desire for freedom and dignity, on the one hand, and the inhuman, oppressive degradation of racism used as a weapon of domination by the white propertied elite, on the other" (414). In this respect, violence becomes linked to freedom for Bigger, as he expresses in his infamous sentiment, "What I killed for, I am" (429).

Wright presents Bigger's identity as a black *man* as confused and contradictory. The "Other's" face, or mask, is often the determinant of one's race, but in recent scholarship race "nevertheless remains an indeterminate trace of divergent subjectivities, inaccessible to any assignable origin or logic. . . . 'Color' is, in fact, the site of a constant formation and deformation of identities and meanings (Benston 71). The reality of blackness exists on a continuum that complicates any connection between one's appearance and essential identity, as does gender. As Valerie Smith explains, the "one-drop rule," for example, attempts to classify race through ancestry, stating that even one black ancestor denotes blackness (44). Smith draws attention to these contradictions by examining narratives in which "legally black" individuals "pass" for white, deconstructing rules such as these. The complexities inherent in these definitions of blackness are similar to the complexities of reading blackness in the Renaissance. Moreover, the performance of blackness on stage offered white audiences comfort and reassurance in their beliefs about blacks' natural inferiority. Ralph Ellison notes that these demeaning representations exceeded the effects of slavery in their "debasement" of black culture (212). For Ellison, "it is we who . . . every hour that we live, reinvest the black face with our guilt; and we do this—by a further paradox, no less ferocious—helplessly,

passionately out of an unrealized need to suffer absolution" (220-21). Here, Ellison addresses not only the subordination inherent in stage performances of blackness, but also in day-to-day performances of blackness.

Indeed, the complex psychological implications of "playing the idiot" or "fool" have garnered much critical attention across disciplines. For example, Mikko Tuhkanen argues in "Of Blackface and Paranoid Knowledge: Richard Wright, Jacques Lacan, and the Ambivalence of Black Minstrelsy":

> The black performers who have put on their masks created for and by the white gaze can fool their audience by "playing (like) an idiot." Yet, as the theorists of minstrelsy emphasize, such strategies can be destructive to the performers themselves in that the minstrel mask threatens to possess the subject behind it. (23)

Tuhkanen further examines how Bigger deliberately employs the role of the fool to manipulate white people. When Bigger considers deceiving white people through his performances he thinks, "They wanted him to draw the picture and he would draw it like he wanted it. He was trembling with excitement. In the past had they not always drawn the picture for him?" (*Native Son* 140). But, as Tuhkanen points out, the game gets too complex for Bigger: he "may have gained insight into the structure of the symbolic but the weight of his historically predetermined position is such that it tends to destroy his newly attained freedom" (24). Similar to Othello, Bigger demonstrates knowledge of the performance of race—even direct manipulation of it—yet ultimately meets his demise because of these performances.

Recent scholarship examining performance in *Native Son* often discusses the performance of blackness in contrast to an alternate identity or humanity. Looking for "acts" that oppose the subservient black man, or the violent black man, critics such as Aimé J. Ellis account for Bigger's violence by demonstrating a "dehumanization" in normative race-performance which leads to an "acting out" in a myriad of ways. In the article "'Boys in the Hood': Black Male Community in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," Ellis interprets Bigger's "playing white" as "a tactic employed by Bigger and his friends to combat racial terror and resist the trauma of negation and submission" (189). For Ellis, this performance is in direct opposition to Bigger's identity as a "nigger," one that she argues "reflects not only a sense of defeat and degradation but also . . . a sense of defiance and insurrection" (189). In order to combat this emasculating role, Bigger must attempt to become more of a man.

Bigger's performance of masculinity, or "playing tough," as Ellis calls it, is informed by what it means to "play white," thus linking the performative nature of race and gender in *Native Son*. Within the first few pages of the novel, Bigger's mother admonishes him for a failed performance of masculinity: "We wouldn't have to live in this garbage dump if you had any manhood in you" (8). Takeuchi argues that manhood, in Bigger's mother's definition, denotes the ability "to earn money and support the family; however, because of racial oppression, Bigger can get only menial jobs that don't pay enough to let him occupy the traditional role of the male breadwinner" (57). These conflicting roles—black and male—perhaps lead to what Edwin Burgum calls "bravado." According to Burgum, Bigger's courage is an overcompensation for the fear he feels; it is unnecessary in the various situations in which Bigger turns to violence, and ultimately defeats its own purposes (70).

In *Native Son*, these performances of masculinity are restricted to a stage viewed by a black audience alone: Bigger and his friends. Ellis addresses the complexity of Bigger's hyper-masculine performances by pointing out that they assert fearlessness and defiance, which help Bigger's sense of self-respect, but are also detrimental to the black community (190). Ellis accounts for Bigger's public masturbation in the cinema through these assertions: "Their masturbatory act, reflecting defiance against social decorum and the status quo, reveals yet another way in which we might be able to make sense of how Bigger and Jack attempt to liberate themselves from white control" (194). In order to survive in a culture that attempts to emasculate, maim, and desexualize them, Bigger and Jack assert their masculinity through public masturbation.

The public masturbation scene is central to a critical discussion of masculinity in *Native Son*. As Eve Oishi claims in "Visual Perversions: Race, Sex, and Cinematic Pleasure," "to-be-looked-at" is an aspect of femininity, while to look, or gaze, upon a performance is masculine (644). Wright positions his black, male characters in these roles as spectators or spectacles to illuminate the shifting position of the "Other." Bigger's early objectification of Mary serves to align him with her in his later objectification as black-rapist. However, in an alternate analysis of the public masturbation scene, Jacqueline Stewart argues that Bigger Thomas exemplifies the "unsophisticated black spectators who uncritically enjoy Hollywood cinema despite . . . these films' illusionist incongruity with the 'realities' of black lives" (655). Instead of interpreting Bigger's actions as a reflection on the film's meaning, Stewart argues that it illuminates his attraction to "the glitter of American popular culture," despite its ultimate alienation of him (655). Because of his lack of a public self, or sense of himself as an "embodied subject," Bigger cannot insert his physical self into the narrative of the film.

Stewart states that Bigger's body signifies "the kind of bestiality and hyper sexuality later ascribed to him by the press" (667). Thus, Bigger and Jack attempt to assert themselves over the images on the screen, and "bristle" at their exclusion from "equal opportunity and upward mobility" (669). These contrasting interpretations of Bigger's and Jack's public masturbation suggest the shifting roles of spectacle and spectator, as well as Bigger's constant attempt to assert his masculinity.

The various intricacies of playing "black," as represented in recent scholarship, suggest the emasculation, or subordination, of black men in these spectacles and performances. Wright draws attention to emasculation in *The Long Dream*, his last published novel, in particular when Tyree and Fishbelly examine Chris Sims's emasculated body. In "Unmaking the Male Body: The Politics of Masculinity in *The Long Dream*," Jeffrey Geiger argues that "the doctor's parting of the thighs appears to render the corpse feminine, while the loss of genitalia provides a metaphor for the displacement of masculine identity at the hands of a violent mob, further inscribing the logic of 'rape' into the torture" (201). While this literal emasculation represents the repercussions of failed performances of blackness, Fishbelly observes of his father, "He knew in a confused way that no white man would ever need to threaten Tyree with castration; Tyree was already castrated" (151). Fishbelly's observation expresses a similar sentiment to that of *Othello*: masculinity is not encompassed in an anatomical penis. Through Fishbelly's assertion, Wright aligns Tyree's *performances* with a surrender of masculinity, and therefore respect.

Consequently, Wright presents his black male protagonists as "systematically unmade in terms of a positive racial or sexual identity" (Geiger 205). This emasculation undoubtedly affects Bigger's interactions with Mary and ultimately leads to her death. Many critics have

suggested that in order to play "the white man," or perform "whiteness," Bigger must assert his power over Mary, the elite, white woman. In "Making Place, Making Race: Performances of Whiteness in the Jim Crow South," Steven Hoelscher notes that "the 'Southern Lady' was a construct that depended on passivity, male protection, and a life on a pedestal. The Southern Lady, empowered by an image of weakness . . . became [a] key maker of [the] new racial order" (657). Although *Native Son* is not set in the South, Wright grew up observing these normative roles. Consequently, in *Native Son*, he demonstrates an equation between violence, rape, and power: Bigger and his friends "play white" by employing physical and sexual violence within their own community. Although Ellis accounts for these hyper-masculine actions as cultivating male rites of passage in a safe environment, Wright emphasizes the feminization of black males by white male authority, and the consequent hyper-masculinity that depends on misogyny in order to empower black men. In Bigger's efforts to reassert the power of the phallus, and normative performances of masculinity, he upholds the oppressive norms placed on women.

The hierarchization of race and gender in recent scholarship on *Native Son* is complex, but Bigger's comments about Mary's deviance from the role of ideal Southern lady are often overlooked. The scene in which Bigger "plays white" sets up a narrative in which Bigger continues to "play" the white man in his interactions with Mary Dalton. As Alan W. France notes, Bigger's "rebellion takes the form of the ultimate appropriation of human beings, the rape-slaying, which is also the ultimate expropriation of patriarchal property, the total consumption of the commodified woman" (414). Interpretations such as these limit Mary's role to a piece of property owned by a white millionaire, an object that Bigger can steal to "even the score" (*Native Son* 155). Scholars such as France argue that acknowledging

the "misogynistic underside" of the text is a must: "only in this way can the interrelationship among patriarchal repression, racism, and capitalist culture be clearly understood" (422).

Although many of the critical discussions of *Native Son* focus on Bigger's identity and humanity, or the true "self" he deviates from in performance, the performative elements of the text suggest that Bigger's self does not exist prior to his acts. Bigger's performances inform his fate, and these acts alone constitute his identity. Wright explains in "How Bigger Was Born" that Bigger is a compilation of many young men he encountered, whom he admittedly presents as "hapless actors" in fateful dramas (427). In examining the drama of *Native Son*, Wright questions the very concept of a self that is separate from the performances of daily life. Much like Shakespeare's *Othello*, *Native Son* is a narrative in which characters prepare various faces to navigate the stages and audiences of life. Existing scholarship demonstrates the fragile continuums on which race and gender depend, and how the freedom that oppressed groups seek is the freedom to *perform* a "self" without restriction, which, for both protagonists, ultimately leads to violent *acts*.

Chapter Two:

Silent-Chaste-Obedient: Failed Performances of Femininity in *Othello* and *Native Son*

"To shed harlot's blood can be no sin."
—Thomas Dekker, *Lust's Dominion*

In *Undoing Gender* Judith Butler states, "The desire to kill someone, or killing someone, for not conforming to the gender norm by which a person is 'supposed' to live suggests that life itself requires a set of sheltering norms, and that to be outside it, to live outside it, is to court death" (34). This statement is an applicable and important theoretical lens through which to view both *Othello* and *Native Son* as it provides an opportunity to interpret Desdemona's and Mary's actions without objectifying them as dead white women, as many of the characters within the respective texts do. In much of the scholarship on both texts, Desdemona and Mary are limited to an object through which black and white men's strife materializes. Butler's assertion offers a new perspective, one in which the black protagonist punishes a failed performance of femininity in an oppressive manner. For the purposes of this thesis, my definition of performed, normative "femininity" is based on the Renaissance trinity of expectations, in which women were to be silent, chaste, and obedient. Will Fisher points out that in the Renaissance, acts and habits played a more crucial role in the construction of gender, and thus the power dichotomy that accompanied it (26). As Othello states of Desdemona: "I do but say what she is: so delicate / with her needle; an admirable musician . . . of so high and plenteous / wit and invention!" (4.1.83). Here, Othello

describes the ideal Renaissance woman: a portrait of the normative role that Desdemona and Mary fail to play.

In illuminating Shakespeare's and Wright's shared interest in the performativity and theatricality of gender as it applies to Desdemona and Mary, one must examine how speech functions within the two works, especially the speech that is applied to, and spoken by, Desdemona and Mary. In the body of scholarship on *Othello*, much has been made of Othello's self-doubt, as well as the possibility for him to rise above his socially constituted self, or, in other words, Iago's verbal attacks. However, one might ask if Desdemona is privy to the same possibility—can she rise above the speech-acts that shape her identity and reputations? In *Native Son*, Wright develops these questions as well. Both texts offer interracial exchanges in which individuals struggle to constitute a self in relation to one another's subordinate positions.

In examining how characters relate to each other in *Othello*, the spoken word is essential. As Eamon Grennan claims, "it is reasonable to assume that *Othello* is not only a play of voices but also a play about voices, an anatomy of the body of speech itself, in all its illocutionary variety" (275). Of oppressive hate-speech, Butler asserts, "The power to 'race' and, indeed, the power to gender, precedes the 'one' who speaks such power, and yet the one who speaks nevertheless appears to have that power" (*Excitable Speech* 49). The characters in *Othello* are subject to this power, and their attempts to function within its rhetoric as equals are confused by the contrasting power hierarchies of white/black and husband/wife. Similarly, the stage adaptation of *Native Son* emphasizes these dynamics in its portrayal of Mary Dalton. Drunk in her bedroom, Mary responds to Bigger's pulling away from her: "What are you scared of? You don't frighten me, Bigger. I frighten you now—See, it's all

turned around. Crazy world, isn't it?" (Green and Wright 42). This statement emphasizes the importance of Mary's deviance from what is expected of a white woman in a bedroom, let alone a white woman in a bedroom with a black man. In this scene, Mary, the new Desdemona, is far from the ideal Southern lady. Similarly, Desdemona fails to meet the standard ideals for Renaissance women, in keeping with *Othello's* overarching theme of deception, despite her innocence of her accused infidelity.

Thus, in examining Desdemona and Mary, and their strikingly similar fates, what they say matters. Both texts demonstrate Butler's problematization of the distance between speech and its effects, as described in *Excitable Speech*: "If the performativity of injurious speech is considered perlocutionary (speech leads to effects, but is not itself the effect), then such speech works its injurious effect only to the extent that it produces a set of non-necessary effects" (39). Through their characters' interactions with one another, Shakespeare and Wright emphasize this tension among words, objects, reality, and truth. The play opens with Iago's setting of the stage for these various performances: "not I for love and duty, / But seeming so, for my peculiar end" (1.1.56-57).

For Othello, words are not ocular proof, yet he consistently demands them: "Hath he said anything?" (4.1.29); "What hath he said?" (4.1.32). Similarly, Othello is convinced that his "parts," "title," and "perfect soul" will "manifest" *him* "rightly" in marrying Desdemona against her father's will (1.1.31-32). However, Lodovico removes his power and command with a brief statement—words alone—at the end of the play (5.2.336). Indeed, after the final scene, audiences are left with ample, material evidence (Desdemona's dead body) to suggest Othello's "quality" is a farce. Similarly, in *Native Son*, Bigger is found guilty of murdering Mary Dalton, despite the complexities readers are privy to.

In *Othello*, Iago says he "plays" the villain, and it is inarguable that his performance relies predominantly, if not solely, on words (2.3.324). Throughout the play, he seems to orchestrate the tragedy, leading to allegorical interpretations of his representation of "the white man." This reading corresponds with Bigger's sentiment that it is "because others have said you were bad and they made you live in bad conditions. When a man hears over and over and looks about him and sees that his life *is* bad, he begins to doubt his own mind" (*Native Son* 428). Interpreting Iago as representative of a communal voice removes a "culpable agent" from the play, instead placing the responsibility on the community, or the "origin" of such ideas (*Excitable Speech* 39). However, while orchestrating destruction through words, Iago consistently speaks to their frivolity, especially as opposed to material, tangible objects: "Her honor is an essence that's not seen; / They have it very oft that have it not. / But for the handkerchief" (4.1.16-18). When a drunk Cassio laments, "Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have / lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of / myself, and what remains is bestial. My reputation, / Iago, my reputation!," Iago assures him by lessening reputation when he compares it to a "bodily wound" in which there is more "sense" (2.3.252-58). Iago's statement is ironic because his assertion that reputation is merely "air" is unsettled by the audience's knowledge of his plan to deceive Othello through words. The disconnect between speech and acts, and its ironic nature in the play, supports Butler's claim that speech constitutes an injury in itself, and should be held to similar conduct standards as bodily wounds.

Desdemona seems to share this sentiment when she assures Cassio, "If I do vow a friendship, I'll perform it / To the last article" (3.3.20-22). Despite such assertions, it is clear from the start that Desdemona is an actor, as adept as Iago at manipulating the system from

within. As Emily Bartels states, “When Desdemona herself testifies, she—to the contrary and better advantage of both—stresses her conventionality and cloaks her unprecedented marital choices in social and familial precedent” (424). Paying due respect to her “noble father,” Desdemona acknowledges that she is “bound” to Othello “for life and education” (1.3.180-82). Desdemona’s speech in act 1 is a necessary performance of self-deprecation, yet deceptive in its stark contrast to her disobedience. This performance is akin to Wright’s description of the race performances in *Black Boy*. Desdemona uses words to expertly position herself in the expected roles of dutiful wife and loving daughter. However, her disobedience, and manipulation of words, would not have gone unnoticed by Renaissance audiences, especially considering consequent speech-acts such as her announcement that she will not rest until she talks Othello into forgiving Cassio (3.3.23). Bartels argues that in these instances, Desdemona merges the postures of good wife and shrew, being “obediently disobedient, to fill a role created by male authorities who needed shrews in order to contain, by criminalizing, female speech” (427). Regardless, Desdemona deviates from the prescribed ideal of the silent daughter and wife, and does not fool her father. Brabantio warns the audience: “Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters’ minds / By what you see them act” (1.1.167-68). He repeats this sentiment as he exits the play: “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She hast deceived her father, and may thee” (1.3.290-91). Such statements suggest that Desdemona’s deviance is not dependent on her relationship with Othello alone.

Recent scholarship bridges the gap between metaphorical and literal blackness, although the “blackness” of both gender and race has been generally regarded as two quite different phenomena. In *Barbarous Play: Race on the English Renaissance Stage*, Lara Bovilsky observes that Desdemona’s agency complicates her “whiteness,” and “in defiance

of her father's and husband's expectations, leads directly to her progressive and virulent racialization in the play" (39). In *Things of Darkness*, Kim Hall attributes the interracial unions in Jacobean literature to a "growing interest in blackness" (125). As represented in the literature, blackness signifies beyond race, representing anxieties over marriage and gender roles. Hall argues that the "place of the family and the state [was] often challenged and questioned through tropes of blackness" (125). Thus, Othello did not blacken Desdemona; as Hall states, women are often "only 'black' or fair in competition with, or in relation to, each other" (134-35). Similarly, Celia Daileader argues that often "black" characters, whether Moors or whores, tell us more about cultural expectations than they do the "imagined qualities" of different races (16).

Desdemona is consistently described in opposition to Othello's blackness, but this comparison refers predominantly to her character, not her skin color. When Emilia asserts, "O, the more angel she, and you the blacker devil," she articulates a correlation between appearance and character that Othello had previously deconstructed (5.2.133-34). In *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama,* Ania Loomba claims, "Blackness was a staple (although not static) ingredient in images of wildness, of evil, of class difference and of female disorderliness" (207). However, these visible differences were often considered indications of moral and spiritual baseness, and even those who weren't visibly black could fall. Loomba states, "If the faithful constitute a permeable and changeable body, then the purity of both the original body and those who are allowed to join it is always suspect" (209). Desdemona can "turn and turn, and yet go on. And turn again'" (4.1.254-55). This inconstancy is representative of the pervasive fear of the changeability of women in the early modern period. However, it is Othello who attempts to assimilate into the dominant culture,

subverting the common trope of dark women, such as Cleopatra, Tamora, and Hippolyta, attempting to assimilate into the culture of their husbands (Loomba 218).

For Othello, Desdemona's "blackness" is proven by her disobedience, or deviance from cultural expectations: "She turned to folly, and she was a whore" (5.2.135). In naming Desdemona such, Othello subordinates his wife; it is an act that constitutes Desdemona disposable. On Desdemona's reaction to this re-constituted self, Daileader argues that "she doesn't have the smarts to capitalize on her beauty: hence the infuriating naiveté—not to say flat absurdity—of statements like 'Am I that name?' (4.2.121) and 'I cannot say whore' (4.2.165)" (25). Although many critics share Daileader's frustration with Desdemona's reaction to Othello's change of demeanor, Desdemona's assertion that she cannot say the word "whore" demonstrates a reverence for words as conduct that is not necessarily shared by the men in the play; moreover, her remarks suggest a surprise at the dissonance between her perceived self and that which is constituted by Othello. As Butler proclaims, "one may, as it were, meet that socially constituted self by surprise with alarm or pleasure, even with shock" (*Excitable Speech* 31). As someone evidently adept with words and their power, Desdemona draws attention to speech-as-act in *Othello.* This performance of femininity is heavily reliant on speech—or, rather, the lack thereof—for the women in *Othello*, as Emilia's last words suggest, "So come my soul to bliss as I speak true! / So speaking as I think, alas, I die" (5.2.256-57). Similarly, Desdemona acknowledges to Cassio that Othello's displeasure with her is likely because of her "free speech" (5.2.124-26). Daileader argues, "Desdemona herself has a knack for damning herself in the very terms with which she attempts to assert her innocence, as when on her death-bed she names her 'love . . . to' Othello as 'sins' (5.2.43)" (25).

In *Native Son*, Wright paints Mary's aggressive speech-acts as similarly fatal, and they certainly play a role in how she is named in the novel and literary criticism alike. Words play an important role in Wright's work in general. As he states in *Black Boy* after reading Mencken's *A Book of Prefaces*, he realized that words could be used as "weapons" (248). Moreover, critic Kimberly Drake has argued that "white society's rape-like assault" on black men occurs on both "mind and body" (66). In both the novel and stage adaptation of *Native Son*, Mary is reduced to "a hot kind of girl" who will "go to bed with anybody" (Green and Wright 36-37). Bigger is taken aback when, in fact, Mary is aggressively sexual and outspoken; moreover, she is naïve: she wants to "go into these houses . . . and just see how your people live" (*Native Son* 79). Sondra Guttman asserts, "Mary refuses to play the role of humble, passive virgin," a role that is undeniably indebted to past portraits of ideal femininity (173). This failure to speak in accordance with a normative gender role ultimately indicts Desdemona and Mary; it inspires Othello's and Bigger's violent urge to, as Othello expresses, "chop [them] into messes!" (4.1.194).

After his murder of Mary, Bigger thinks, "Gee, what a fool she was . . . Carrying on that way!" (128). And much of the scholarly criticism on *Native Son* takes Bigger's side: "Mary Dalton of *Native Son* enlists sympathy for her murderer by being the spoiled daughter of a slumlord, by tempting Bigger, and playing with him flagrantly" (Brivic 232). Guttman asserts, "In all her interactions with Bigger, Mary violates her given place" (174). Thus, when Mary assures Bigger she is on his side, her sentiment only serves to emphasize her transgressions. While sitting next to Mary, listening to her ironic statements about equality, Bigger thinks: "Suddenly he wanted to seize some heavy object in his hand and grip it with all the strength of his body and in some strange way rise up and stand in naked space above

the speeding car and with one final blow blot it out—with himself and them in it" (80). In this respect, both Bigger and Othello respond to the words Desdemona and Mary speak with violence.

In their use of words to subordinate Othello and Bigger, Desdemona and Mary subvert the predator/prey dichotomy that pervades both texts in descriptions of interracial sex. Desdemona's and Mary's aggressive sexual behaviors initiate these erotic encounters, and these behaviors begin in speech and end in smothered silence. That these women are not "prey" elicits sympathy for the men who silence them. Daileader notes that if Desdemona "wanted it," then she is simply "whitewashed," not truly white, as is Tamora, from Shakespeare's *Titus and Andronicus*, who is "racially marked as a Goth" (22). The text of *Othello* makes clear that Desdemona initiates the relationship. Othello describes Desdemona's reaction to his stories:

> She thanked me
>
> And bade me, if I had a friend who loved her,
>
> I should but teach him how to tell my story,
>
> And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake. (1.3.162-65)

Through her spoken "hints," Desdemona demonstrates a forwardness that does not fit with the various descriptions of her virtue throughout the play, creating a clear distinction between how she is perceived and how she acts. In addition, Dympna Callaghan asserts that Desdemona's voyage to Cyprus is sexually motivated, citing Desdemona's lament that the "rites for why I love him are bereft me" (1.3.257). She argues that this "display of apparently insatiable female sexual appetite severely problematizes Desdemona's characterization as a virtuous woman" (141).

Although Othello's murder of Desdemona may temporarily restore his sense of dominance, the act vindicates her and indicts himself, validating the racist hate-speech that permeates the play. In the article "An Essence That's Not Seen: The Primal Scene of Racism in *Othello*," Arthur Little, Jr., argues:

> The symbolic reading of the black devil or beast overpowering the white woman is already in place. When Othello kills Desdemona, his literal blackness becomes metaphorical, or, better still, he becomes the literal embodiment of a metaphorical blackness. . . . During the play, Othello does become a beast, a sexual deviant, a whoremonger, a devil, and a rapist, evoking also in these closing moments the fantasies of a necrophiliac: "Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee, / And love thee after" (5.2.18-19). (322)

This interpretation of *Othello* is common, but Wright's subsequent portrayal of interracial sex, and his direct allusions to the aforementioned scene, illuminates, emphasizes, and problematizes the tensions in metaphorical blackness. By intensifying Mary's initiation of the interracial erotic encounter, Wright deconstructs the idea of rape in interracial relationships.

Rape is a word with many connotations; denotatively, it is "the act of taking something by force"; "to seize or devour prey"; "to violate (a person) sexually; to commit rape against (a person); esp. (of a man) to force (a woman) to have sexual intercourse against her will" ("rape, n.1" *OED*). As these definitions suggest, it is a notably gendered action for undeniable reasons—in order to rape someone, one must dominate that person; thus, the concept of a woman (subordinate) raping a man (dominant) subverts the gender hierarchy in, what some would deem, an emasculating way. Yet, the gendering of predator and prey in

rape does not fit the trajectory of either text. In the stage adaptation of *Native Son*, Bigger asserts of Mary, "It was your fault. I didn't want to come to your room. You were too drunk to walk. You made me come, you bitch. I hated you then—I hate you now! Yeh" (Green and Wright 46). Indeed, Bigger's concept of rape in the novel is more inclusive:

> Had he raped her? Yes, he had raped her. Every time he felt as he had felt that night, he raped. But rape was not what one did to a woman. Rape was what one felt when one's back was against a wall and one had to strike out, whether one wanted to or not, to keep the pack from killing one. He committed rape every time he looked into a white face. . . . But it was rape when he cried out in hate deep in his heart as he felt the strain of living day by day. That, too, was rape. (262)

Here, Wright attempts to demonstrate that "rape" is a *word* used to suppress black resistance. Bigger goes on to describe himself as "a long, taut piece of rubber which a thousand white hands had stretched to the snapping point, and when he snapped it was rape" (658). Guttman is one of the many scholars who point out that "rape" denotes sexual violence in general, including violence against black women like Bessie, Bigger's girlfriend. For Guttman, Bigger's rape of Mary is symbolic, but Wright takes care to differentiate between Bigger's violence towards Mary and his violence towards Bessie. Guttman asserts, "This distinction is crucial to the extent that it suggests a reconsideration of Wright's portrayal of women" (171). Because Bigger rapes and murders Bessie, Wright complicates his status as victim at the hands of a white world.

Yet, in both material/embodied ways and in symbolic/allegorical ways, it is Desdemona and Mary, Mary especially, who put the protagonists' backs against walls. As

Bigger says of Mary, "She asked me a lot of questions. She acted and talked in a way that made me hate her. She made me feel like a dog. I was so mad I wanted to cry" (405). In this statement, Bigger emphasizes the impact of Mary's words, and *responds* with violence. This regeneration through violence—through bodily wounds—is evident in the text of *Othello*, albeit in different ways. Othello, as a soldier, goes from slave to master. Similar to Bigger, when faced with the possibility of subordination—being cuckolded by his wife—he is unable to take control with non-violent measures, and it is clear that both men feel that had Desdemona and Mary *acted* differently, the tragic outcome could have been avoided. Instead, "Othello's construction of the murder of his wife appropriates and extends Iago's construction of her (and every woman) as a notorious strumpet" (Bernard 941). Consequently, the smothering of these women can be read as an embodied reaction to what they say. They are silenced; they are quieted; they are "blotted out" (*Native Son* 80).

Despite the power dynamics evident in these interracial, erotic encounters, by the end of *Native Son*, Bigger is on trial for a "sex crime," even though he does not rape Mary Dalton. In the concluding speech of *Othello*, Othello's final order—for the surviving characters to speak of him as he is—attempts to acknowledge the weight of words (5.2.347). Is Othello more than Desdemona's dead body lying on the bed? According to him, he is "one that loved not wisely but too well; / Of one not easily jealous but, being wrought, / Perplexed in the extreme" (5.2.349-51). And who is to say he is not still perplexed about the object lying on the bed before him? Othello's perplexity mirrors that of Bigger's when Bigger claims, "White and black folks is strangers. We don't know what each other is thinking" (*Native Son* 324-25). This statement often holds true in both texts, certainly—when even speech deceives.

Chapter Three:

The Bedroom Spectacle in *Othello* and *Native Son*

When Othello demands that Iago provide him evidence of Desdemona's infidelity, he replies, "Where's satisfaction? / It is impossible you should see this, / Were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys, / As salt as wolves in pride, and fools as gross / As ignorance made drunk" (2.398-402). Although Othello never witnesses Desdemona's infidelity, audiences of both *Othello* and *Native Son* continue to witness the interracial, erotic, violent encounters that occur in the bedroom, seemingly more "impossible" scenes to witness. Indeed, Bigger Thomas's accidental murder of Mary Dalton, and his consequent dismemberment of her body, propelled *Native Son* into notoriety. Similarly, the ending of *Othello* undoubtedly scandalized Londoners, whom Michael Neill claims would have reacted similarly to "the unendurable nature of what [was] before them . . . the most violently abrupted of all Shakespearean endings" (383). Thus, in the final scenes of both *Othello* and *Native Son*, the black and white bodies create the spectacle. As Butler states, "The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others both also to touch and to violence" (*Undoing Gender* 21). As the vessel through which characters act, and are acted upon, the body aligns the white, female victim with the black, male protagonist in the scenes of death and rape. Because of this subjection to the gaze of other characters and audience members in the final scenes, Othello's and Bigger's attempts to reassert their masculinity, and thus dominance, through violence are thwarted.

In the case of *Othello* and *Native Son*, the murder scene takes place in the bedroom—the site of cultural anxiety over interracial sex—and is presented by both authors as spectacle. These scenes warrant an averted gaze, but simultaneously represent a site of cultural fascination and fear; audience members and readers behold Desdemona and Mary "tupped," or topped, literally, as they are smothered in their beds (3.3.401). As Eve Oishi claims "to-be-looked-at" is an aspect of femininity, while to look, or gaze, upon a performance is masculine (644). Consequently, Othello and Bigger become further emasculated in their objectification as "black-rapist." Although both texts deliberately problematize the white woman's consent to these sexual acts, the bestial imagery used to described these acts degrades *both* the black man and the white woman. Thus, although most scholarship has examined the descriptions of interracial sex as representative of the protagonist's "blackness," they are equally indicative of the white woman's "blackness."

Both Shakespeare and Wright highly eroticize the bedroom scene, which emphasizes the perfomative nature of race and gender. Guttman states, "Mary's murder is replete with sexual imagery and sexual tension . . . the sexualized portrayal of the scene suggests that Mary's death is, to a certain extent, predetermined by the race-class system—a system maintained by ideological narratives that sexualize racial difference" (179). Both *Othello* and *Native Son* propose the possibility that in order for these white women to be in bed with a black man, they must be in an altered state, hence the term "jungle-fever": "a form of remittent fever caused by the miasma of a jungle; the hill-fever of India" ("jungle, n." *OED*). This altered state is more literal in Mary's character, who is undeniably intoxicated when she deviates from sexual norms. Desdemona, on the other hand, is rumored to be under Othello's spell, but this is pure speculation on the part of the men in the play. In preferring Othello as a

husband over Cassio, or even Roderigo, Desdemona deviates from the expected script. As Butler indicates, "preference" is more akin to "practice," and Desdemona's deviance in her swift marriage to Othello demonstrates "improvisation" (*Undoing Gender* 96). Desdemona is acting out of the ordinary, and no one, including Othello, offers a rational explanation for this shift.

Despite the concept of jungle-fever, the language Mary and Bigger use subverts the charms and witchcrafts Othello is accused of. Bigger feels "strange" and "possessed" when Mary's lips touch his (83). After the murder he feels "that he had been in the grip of a weird spell and was now free" (86). These sentiments contrast with Bigger's later assertion, "No; it was no accident, and he would never say that it was" (101). Bigger's perception of the event mirrors Desdemona's denial of Othello's ever-changing performance. Brivic states that this paradox, the accidental nature of Mary's death, is central to the plot of *Native Son* (234). In this respect, Bigger's body becomes vulnerable, despite his attempts to assert his dominance through violence. As Butler asserts, ". . . we are constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies; we are constituted as fields of desire and physical vulnerability, at once publically assertive and vulnerable" (*Undoing Gender* 18).

To reassert their masculinity in the face of this consistent objectification, both men turn to violence. Their violent acts give the protagonists a sense of control but also dehumanize their victims. Butler states that "on the level of discourse, certain lives are not considered lives at all, they cannot be humanized; they fit no dominant frame for the human" (*Undoing Gender* 21). As black men, Othello and Bigger experience this process of dehumanization; however, a similar process occurs with their subsequent acts of violence, dehumanizing Desdemona and Mary due to their respective failed performances of

femininity. A power struggle becomes apparent in the act of suffocation; the protagonist places himself above his victim; both Desdemona and Mary struggle to rise as they are pushed down and silenced. Moreover, in respect to these murders, faces—"visages"—are denied in crucial moments. Thus, in both texts, the smothering symbolizes the loss of "self" to the performances—deviant or normative—of race and gender.

The murder scene in *Othello* begins with Othello entering the bedroom where Desdemona is sleeping and revealing his plan to "put out the light" (5.2.5). He then admits, "I can thy former light restore" (9). This sacrificial language suggests that by performing his assumed role as violent, black rapist, Othello will exonerate Desdemona from her own blackness—her own crimes—and restore her perfect femininity. As Emilia asserts of the murder, "O, the more angel she, / And you the blacker devil" (5.2.133-34). However, it also suggests that Desdemona will be vindicated in the eyes of the audience—his shadow will restore her "light." Quite notably, Othello's choice to smother Desdemona literally silences her. Even at the time of her death, she pleads to "*say* one prayer" (5.2.83). Moreover, silencing her takes longer than Othello anticipates: "What noise is this? Not dead? Not yet quite dead? / I that am cruel am yet merciful; / I would not have thee linger in thy pain. / So, so" (5.2.87-90). But Desdemona's struggle, as well as her final words, is necessary in demonstrating her agency and responsibility, especially regarding the responsibility for the tragic scene. Desdemona's final words before her death do not indict Othello. When asked who is responsible, she responds: "Nobody. I myself. Farewell. / Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell!" (5.2.127-29).

Desdemona's white body and Othello's black body constitute the violence and horror of this final performance, as well as vulnerability. Both Othello and Desdemona demonstrate

agency through their bodies, as Butler suggests, but also mortality: in her death, Desdemona becomes no more than an unseemly object that must be hid, her death a "heavy act" (5.2.375). For audience members, Othello acts the "barbarous Moor," yet his final order—to tell his story with accuracy—suggests otherwise (5.2.347). His request serves to further confuse Othello's "self"; indeed, according to Othello, he is "one that loved not wisely but too well; / Of one not easily jealous but, being wrought, / Perplexed in the extreme" (349-51). In interpreting this statement, Butler's performance theories clarify the shifting identities throughout the play. For her, any "I" or "self" emerges "precisely as an improvisational possibility within a field of constraints" (*Undoing Gender* 15).

Othello's question, "But O, vain boast! / Who can control his fate?" directly parallels the "FATE" section of *Native Son* (270-71). According to the character Lodovico, Othello once acted "good," but "fell in the practice of a cursed slave" (5.2.296-98). Much like Shakespeare, Wright draws attention to the theatrical nature of the bedroom scene, prefacing it with Bigger's interaction with Mary in the movie theater. Although Bigger can "do with her as he like[s]" when she is on screen, the actual performance is much different: ". . . how different the girl had seemed in the movie. On the screen she was not dangerous and his mind could do with her as it liked. But here in her home she walked over everything, put herself in the way" (55). Wright emphasizes this ever-present theme of performance in act 4 of the stage production of *Native Son*, which begins with the following stage direction: "At the center rear is a filmy curtained window, and to the right of that a huge oblong mirror, so tilted that its depths are discernible, but only a vague blur of images is reflected in it" (Green and Wright 47). Here, Wright emphasizes that our perceptions distort even the truest reflections. Indeed, when Bigger sees himself in this mirror after killing Mary, he stutters,

"Don't you look at me—don't say I done it—I didn't, I tell you" (449). The stage directions read, *"(for a moment the image in the mirror holds him fascinated. He clasps MARY tightly to him as if to protect her and himself)*" (449). In this moment, audiences perceive Bigger as disrobed, so to speak, but what remains is no more than a fascination with the role he is playing—with what he has become.

All of these theatrical elements of *Native Son* play out in the scene of Mary's murder. This spectacle relies on the connotations connected to rape and the over-sexualized body of the black male. Abdul JanMohamed suggests that Wright's view indicates that "regardless of gender, the racialized subject is always already constructed as a 'raped' subject. . . . Rape thus subsumes the totality of force relations on the racial border, which is in fact always a sexual border" (109). Wright's deliberate problematization of rape in Bigger's infamous definition of rape problematizes it as a gendered "act," and expands the word to include a condition, a feeling, an event, and a spectacle inclusive of all subjects. In Bigger's case, his acceptance of the "idea" he raped Mary "comes with unimaginable costs and cannot be understood outside his absolute victimization by the gaze, script, and spectacle of the white world in which he lives," as Jonathan Elmer points out (783).

As does Othello, Bigger realizes that Mary's crimes—her blackness—will be exonerated in his murder of her. Her skin will become as white and "smooth as monumental alabaster" (5.2.5). However, as the black man who murdered her, he will become demonized. He lists the facts: "He stood with her body in his arms in the silent room and cold facts battered him like waves sweeping in from the sea: she was dead; she was white; she was a woman; he had killed her; he was black; he might be caught; he did not want to be caught; if

he were they would kill him" (89). In this moment the binaries of white and black, and male and female, are crucial to Bigger's fate.

Despite his knowledge of the repercussions of *acting* in the way he does, Bigger's dismemberment of Mary occurs because "he *had* to" do it (92). Similar to Othello, Bigger does not attempt to justify the murder to the white community until after attempting to hide it from them. Wright places deliberate emphasis on what Bigger *has* to do in the situation he is in—"He *had* to burn this girl"—yet deliberately follows this exclamation with, "With eyes, glazed, with nerves tingling with excitement, he looked about the basement. He saw a hatchet" (92). Indeed, the "horror of this thing" bothers Bigger, but Wright does not specify what the "thing" is (92). Is it his murder? The graphic nature of the severed head? His fate? Wright further emphasizes Bigger's performance of masculinity after he severs Mary's head from her body: "He was not crying, but his lips were trembling and his chest was heaving" (92). Despite his embodied reaction, his suppressed crying signifies a refusal to act in a certain manner, a traditionally feminine manner. Bigger will not compromise his newly obtained position of power over Mary by becoming a leaky vessel. Unlike Desdemona who "weep'st" at the time of her death, Bigger does not cry (5.2.78).

In the scenes following Mary's death, Bigger recognizes that he must play a new, deceptive role: "Could people tell he had done something wrong by the way he acted?" (102). After Bigger is questioned regarding Mary's disappearance, he stretches out to go to sleep and dreams of carrying a big package in his hand: ". . . he stopped near an alley corner and unwrapped it and the paper fell away and he saw—it was his *own* head lying with black face and half-closed eyes and lips parted with white teeth showing and hair wet with blood and the red glare grew brighter" (165). This dream can be interpreted as Bigger's

subconscious knowledge, and fear, regarding his fate for killing a white woman; at the same time, it can be read as evidence of his identification with Mary as "nonhuman" or less human as defined against masculinity and whiteness.

As *Othello* and *Native Son* progress after the respective murders of Desdemona and Mary, it becomes clear that even though the protagonists know they murdered, they look to displace the blame. In Othello's monologue, Othello verbalizes his justification for killing Desdemona. If he does not, "she'll betray more men" (5.2.6). Again, in order to justify his actions, he sees it as a "sacrifice" instead of a "murder" (5.2.66). Despite this justification, Othello immediately attempts to hide what he has done when he hears Emilia coming: "Soft, by and by; let me the curtains draw" (5.2.105). This sentiment suggests that Othello's seeming confidence in his action is deceptive, and that Desdemona's murder should be concealed. Similarly, Bigger muses, "Maybe someone else did all that" (*Native Son* 463).

Placing the blame on the white man, white woman, or fate, both men reflect upon their performance, searching to separate their "self" from the horrific act. As Cross Damon thinks in Wright's *The Outsider,* "Why were some people fated, like Job, to live a never-ending debate between themselves and their sense of what they believed life should be?" (24). These protagonists struggle to define themselves outside of what they are supposed to be. Othello, then, has many "visages": the "visages of duty" as Iago describes in the opening scene of the play (1.1.47). The lined coats, the costumes, which demand others to become "duteous and knee-crooking knave[s]" (1.1.42). But these "visages," these faces, wear out in time, as Iago predicts in the early scenes of *Othello.*

That Othello and Bigger finally become what is expected of them in these final scenes indicates a symbolic death of any semblance of self: "In a sense, every murder is an act of

self-destruction" (Brivic 236). Although both men attempt to justify their respective murders to others and themselves, the fact that they killed a white woman, and consequently played out their fated role, is irreparable. Although Bigger continually asserts, "When a man kills, it's for something . . . I didn't know I was really alive . . . until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em'" (392), Brivic argues, "The obsessive repetition of Bigger's rationalization serves to emphasize its weakness" (237). Similarly, Mary and Desdemona are not white men with guns or rapiers. Their respective emasculations of the protagonists are complicated; thus, it becomes harder for Othello and Bigger to keep the "knowledge of [this] fear thrust firmly down in [them]" (42).

Of Bigger's accidental smothering, Daileader notes, "The color binaries comprised by the bed, the pillow, the white young woman, and the repeatedly described 'white blur' underscore the allusion to *Othello* legible in the aborted inter-racial eroticism, in the tropes of demonic possession and theatre, and of course in the smothering of this 'nouvelle Desdemona'" (189). As Daileader asserts, the bedroom scene is the pinnacle of Wright's Shakespearean allusion. This scene is also where the actors' performances come to a head, where Simone de Beauvoir's claim, "one is not born, but, rather, *becomes* a woman" is relevant: the characters act in accordance with normative, oppressive race and gender expectations (qtd. in Butler, "Performative Acts" 187). The striking similarities between these texts' two scenes cannot be overemphasized; they symbolize the destructive influences of the normalization of race and gender performance. Both Shakespeare and Wright provide audiences with the sight Iago deems impossible, yet simultaneously force them to confront the horrific results of their fascination.

Despite the figurative and literal struggles to connect in *Othello* and *Native Son*—struggles that come to a head in the bedroom scenes—the willingness to connect and to be intimate, however horrific the failure of these attempts, is notable. In examining *Othello* and *Native Son* side-by-side, Butler's critical question, "how might the world be reorganized so that this conflict can be ameliorated," becomes crucial (*Undoing Gender* 5). In the article, "Race Intimacy," Margaret Kruszewska writes, "The lack of honest dialogue about love between the races can only be a reflection of the reluctance of all races to look deeper into the significant, prevalent, and complex transformations that can take place through intimacy" (743). Through a discussion of her own play, *Desdemona's Children*, Kruszewska reflects deeply and personally on the ending of *Othello*, arguing that the "white woman becomes the 'enemy' because the true enemy is just too huge to oppose" (745). Thus, characters and readers alike make assumptions about the white woman who is intimate with a black man: that she entices black men, will always be privileged in an interracial relationship because of her "whiteness," and is a direct lure to "the lynching tree" (745). Kruszewska writes:

> *Desdemona: Was I supposed to not fall in love with you*
>
> *black man*
>
> *not your lips telling stories*
>
> *your honeyed voice*
>
> *your fragmented heart* (748)

This complexity in interpreting the final scenes of both texts must be addressed—that the white woman could be more than an object, the black man more than a monster, and the relationships more than a power struggle. As Marvin Rosenberg argues in *The Masks of Othello*: "To come away from [Desdemona's] tragic experience remembering her as either a

saint or sinner is to abstract from the complex weave of the character a few small threads of behavior, meaningless out of the pattern, and find in them the design of the whole" (256). But Desdemona's complexity has been addressed in more depth than Mary's consistency—and, in both cases, they must be protected from objectification, at least in the literature classroom. As Ruth Vanita argues of Desdemona's fate, "In each case, the death blow is struck by one particular individual, but it is made possible by the collusion of a number of others" (342). As critics, we must not be another individual who makes the objectification of these women—or the interracial intimacy they attempt to initiate—possible.

Consequently, the tragedy of both *Othello* and *Native Son* is the fear surrounding the deviance from normative, or expected, performances of race and gender. The parallel bedroom scenes are the culmination of this fear. In essence, no self can be found but the expectations, or normalization, of race and gender overtaking these characters. The predicament of Othello and Bigger, and of Desdemona and Mary, is the opposing, dictated roles from the Iagos in their lives: in a double bind, these characters cannot act in an appropriately normative manner that satisfies society. This struggle is imparted through the improvisation, grief, and confusion in the bedroom scenes. As Butler claims, ". . . grief displays the way in which we are in the thrall of our relations with others that we cannot always recount or explain, that often interrupts the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control" (*Undoing Gender* 19). In the concluding speech of *Othello*, Lodovico orders Cassio to draw the curtains around Desdemona's body: "The object poisons sight; / Let it be hid" (5.2.369). But, clearly, both Shakespeare and Wright wanted the "object" to be dragged

to light, forcing audiences to confront it, alongside the horrifying consequences of the normalization of race and gender performance.

Conclusion

In "I Have Seen Black Hands," a 1933 poem that Michel Fabre notes alludes to Jacques's "Seven Ages of Man" in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, Wright writes:

> I am black and I have seen black hands
> Raised in fists of revolt, side by side
> With the white fists of white workers
> And some day—and it is this only which sustains me—
> Some day there shall be millions and millions of them
> On some red day in a burst of fists on a new horizon. (qtd. in *Unfinished Quest* 99-100)

In this specific poem, one of Wright's earliest publications, white and black workers' united effort necessitates Wright's vision for change. However, in "Blueprint for Negro Writing," his literary manifesto that influenced a generation of black writers, Wright challenges black authors to address their art "to the Negro himself, his needs, his sufferings, his aspirations" (98). Despite this seeming dichotomy of a black writer's role and subsequent artistic production, Wright realized that whichever route black writers chose, all types of authors influenced them on their literary paths. Wright turned to numerous writers, both black and white, to direct him on his own literary quest to end racial oppression.

At the end of "Southern Night," part I of the autobiographical *Black Boy,* Wright states, "My reading had created a vast sense of distance between me and the world in which I lived and tried to make a living, and that sense of distance was increasing each day" (253).

Because books "opened up new avenues of feeling and seeing," Wright recognized the oppressive environment that surrounded him (252). He lists specific *white* authors that opened his eyes to these injustices, among them Anatole France, Joseph Conrad, George Moore, Edgar Allan Poe, and Fredrick Nietzsche (249). Simultaneously, and somewhat ironically, these writers belonged to the collective "white people" of whom Wright's black coworker warned him: "When you're in front of [them], *think* before you act, *think* before you speak. Your way of doing things is all right among *our* people but not for *whites.* They won't stand for it" (*Black Boy* 184). Despite the effect his co-worker's words had on him, Wright deconstructs this racial binary through his writing, the same way influential white authors he read did, especially H.L. Mencken whom Wright credits for teaching him to use "words as weapons" (248).

Wright also includes two European playwrights in this list of influential writers, George Bernard Shaw and Henrik Ibsen. Although he makes no direct allusion to these dramatists in his own writing, he read each author's plays. Fabre notes in *Richard Wright: Books and Writers* that Wright purchased a copy of Ibsen's *Works* shortly after his move to Chicago, and as late as 1945 he bought Shaw's *Pygmalion: A Romance in Five Acts* (145, 178). Thus, white playwrights like Shaw, Ibsen, Eugene O'Neil and Lillian Hellman inspired Wright's writing, including his own ventures into playwriting. This interest in the theatre undeniably influenced his most important novel, *Native Son*, which, alongside texts such as Shakespeare's *Othello*, makes one of the great political statements about race, gender, and violence.

Surprisingly, Wright does not include Shakespeare in the list of influential authors in the final draft of *Black Boy.* However, as biographies and other critical works point out,

Wright acknowledged Shakespeare's influence both before the publication of *Black Boy* and long after he had moved to Paris in 1947. Moreover, in the list of influences in *Black Boy,* Wright mentions Frank Harris, a noted Shakespeare biographer. He also cites Mencken's *Prejudices*, in which the Baltimore journalist discusses contemporary criticism on Shakespeare (406). Thus, the absence of Shakespeare's name among the writers Wright notes in *Black Boy* does not accurately reflect Shakespeare's influence on Wright as an aspiring playwright and writer of fiction. Kenneth Kinnamon agrees that Wright's deliberate parallels to *Native Son* indicate "a close knowledge" of *Othello* (358). Similarly, Fabre notes in *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* that Wright's regret that he could not "write in serenity like Shakespeare" nonetheless encouraged a new direction to his work (272).

Although Wright never fully realized his own dramatic thunder on stage, he continued to explore other theatrical pursuits. Without Shakespeare's influence, he might not have attempted to dramatize *Native Son*, "the first Broadway production of [the] season to garner a four-star rating," nor explored other dramatic avenues (Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* 210). Additionally, the aura of Shakespeare undoubtedly placed Wright in theatre circles and led to Wright's befriending contemporary playwrights, most notably Langston Hughes. Among other works, Hughes authored a play entitled *Shakespeare in Harlem*, and attempted to dramatize Wright's short story "Fire and Cloud" in 1938 (Dick 12). Wright's friendship with authors such as Hughes added to his familiarity with the theatre and inspired him to participate in dramatic clubs and organizations such as the Chicago Repertory in 1933 and the Federal Theater in 1936. Wright had read Shakespeare prior to this involvement.

Thus, on both a biographical and theoretical level, an inter-textual examination of *Othello* and *Native Son* allows for a transformation of the limiting binary of race, and also of

gender, especially when examined through Butler's theories of performance. As Wright says of Bigger, "I wanted the reader to feel that Bigger's story was happening *now*, like a play upon the stage" ("How Bigger Was Born" 459). As Butler notes in her seminal essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," *acts* not only incorporate "the identity of the actor," but a study of performance reveals that the construction of "identity" is often a "compelling illusion, an object of *belief*" (188). Although the removal of an individual identity or self is disconcerting to much of the scholarship written on *Othello* and *Native Son*, other interpretive possibilities open up within both texts when a culturally constituted self or "I" is removed. Characters' humanity can be rejuvenated moment to moment, even after the most horrific *acts*, even in the most horrific conditions, because each moment defies the idea of a fixed self. The world as a stage is a world of endless possibility, a world of improvisation that allows for many Othellos, Biggers, Desdemonas, and Marys in each moment, regardless of what role they were, or are, *supposed* to play.

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Alicia Page Andrzejewski was born in Charlotte, NC, but moved frequently throughout her life, from the United States, to England, to Thailand, to Holland, and finally to London, Ontario, in Canada where she graduated from St. Thomas Aquinas High School in 2006. She went on to get her BA in English with a Psychology minor at Mars Hill College, NC. During this time, her focus remained on Renaissance Drama, particularly a feminist materialist approach to Shakespeare's work. From there, she received her MA in English at Appalachian State University and will be continuing her study of Renaissance Drama in New York City, at the City University of New York's Graduate Center.