

Part 3

Gender

CHAPTER 7

European vs. African Gendered Genealogies

Revisiting *Othello* in Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood* and Toni Morrison's

Desdemona

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Abstract

Over the centuries, *Othello* has become an emblematic portrait of the black presence in the West. Historically, many black writers and theorists have felt interpellated by Shakespeare's play's compelling picture of black isolation and double consciousness. Given the far-reaching influence of this representation of diasporic blackness, it is not surprising that Caryl Phillips has repeatedly turned to muse on the character in his non-fiction and fiction alike. In this [Chapter 1](#) examine his rewriting of Othello's voice in *The Nature of Blood* (1997) and compare it to *Desdemona* (2012), a play written collaboratively by Nobel-Prize awardee Toni Morrison and Mali musician Rokia Traoré, in order to trace their parallel genealogies. I argue that both Phillips and Morrison examine in rich detail the race, class, and gender tensions that underlie their source text, mapping complex affective geographies of belonging and deeply entangled relationalities.

Over the centuries, *Othello* has become an emblematic portrait of the black presence in the West, but one that is also extremely complicated when viewed from a black perspective, as Kim F. Hall

has observed: “Black love of Shakespeare is a site of profound struggle and *Othello* its most vexed object.”¹ Like *The Tempest*, another Shakespearean play that has been the subject of much contemporary reinterpretation, *Othello* offers a range of provocative themes for contemporary audiences, from interracial sexual relations to violence against women and East/West military encounters.² For the most part, such reinterpretations aim to dislodge Shakespeare’s work from its central role in the British colonial and imperialist project. Canadian playwright Djanet Sears, for instance, has described herself as feeling “haunted” by the play: “Othello is the first African portrayed in the annals of western dramatic literature. In an effort to exorcise this ghost, I have written *Harlem Duet*, a rhapsodic blues tragedy [that] explores the effects of race and sex on the lives of people of African descent.”³ As a result, such a decolonizing effort can be identified as an “appropriation” in Jonathan Dollimore’s now classic definition, that is, an act by which

¹ Kim F. Hall, “Introduction,” in Keith Hamilton Cob, *American Moor* (London: Methuen, 2020): i. Despite a long history of stage adaptations, it is worth noting with Carol C. Rutter that the performance history of the play is seriously lacking in black directors, male or female (Rutter, “Othello-Performance History of the Title Role,” *YouTube*, uploaded by the National Theatre (14 November 2013), <https://youtu.be/WrLvq1EcRH0> (accessed 31 August 2021)).

² For an account of *Othello*’s rising critical currency after 9/11, see Imtiaz Habib, “*Othello*: The State of the Art,” in *Othello: A Critical Reader*, ed. Robert C. Evans (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2015): 83.

³ Djanet Sears, “Notes of a Coloured Girl,” in *Harlem Duet* (Toronto: Sirocco, 1997): 14.

“subordinate, marginal or dissident elements could appropriate dominant discourses and likewise transform them in the process.”⁴

Whereas some writers have maintained the original dramatic form for their respective appropriations, others have turned to other genres. This is the case of Caryl Phillips, who, given the far-reaching influence of Shakespeare’s representation of diasporic blackness, has repeatedly mused on the character both in his non-fiction and in his fiction. Early on, the travelogue resulting from a journey across Europe he conducted in 1984, entitled *The European Tribe* (1987), gave this topic ample space and concluded with the writer positioning himself in relation to Othello’s alien status in white Christian Europe. A fictional but fully fleshed portrait of Othello appeared ten years later in *The Nature of Blood* (1997), which, according to Bénédicte Ledent, should be read as an extension of that earlier text and in line with Phillips’s own “historically and culturally nomadic self.”⁵ More recently, Phillips’s essay “Rude am I in my speech” (2011) uses Othello’s self-deprecating words before the Venetian Senate as a springboard to examine differences between first- and second-generation immigrants as embodied by Phillips’s father and himself. These three stepping-stones, located as they are in

⁴ Jonathan Dollimore, “Introduction: Shakespeare, Cultural Materialism and the New Historicism,” in *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism*, ed. Jonathan Dollimore & Alan Sinfield (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1985): 10.

⁵ Bénédicte Ledent, *Caryl Phillips* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002): 137.

different decades, show beyond doubt that *Othello* (both the play and the character) has weighed on Phillips's mind for well over thirty years.⁶

Taking my cue from but also expanding on Ayanna Thompson's assertion that "*Othello* is a different play depending on where you are in history,"⁷ I want to argue here that it is a different play depending on your affective geographies too. To this purpose, I compare Phillips's rewriting of Othello's voice in *The Nature of Blood to Desdemona* (2012), a play written collaboratively by Nobel-Prize winner Toni Morrison and Malian musician Rokia Traoré. I have chosen the latter text because I see Phillips and Morrison as working within a parallel

⁶ For a more detailed account of Othello-like figures in Phillips's works, see Maurizio Calbi, "'The Ghosts of Strangers': Hospitality, Identity and Temporality in Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood*," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 6.2 (2006): 38–54. Kathie Birat aptly puts *The European Tribe* in context within Phillips's non-fiction (see Kathie Birat, "'Really no more than the report of one man's way of seeing': Caryl Phillips's Non-Fictional Works," *Moving Worlds* 7.1, special issue "Familial and Other Conversations," ed. Bénédicte Ledent (2007): 59–73). Furthermore, Michael Rothberg has persuasively argued that Othello "represents an historical mirror for Phillips's own condition as a 'black European success' who now lives in two of late modernity's global cities, New York and London." See Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remember the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009): 157.

⁷ Ayanna Thompson, "Othello with Ayanna Thompson," *Bloomsbury Academic Podcast* (19 June 2020), <http://bloomsburyacademicpod.com/2020/06/othello-with-ayanna-thompson/> (accessed 21 October 2020).

genealogy.⁸ Like Phillips, the African American writer engaged in the analysis of the representation of black people in American literature from very early on, producing throughout her life a number of influential essays in the study of African American and black diasporic literatures. Her Harvard lectures, collected in *Playing in the Dark* (1992), examined the ways in which black characters were othered in American literature and cast as white people's shadows. Her analysis of racism and the configurations of blackness continued up to her latest collections of essays, *The Origin of Others* (2017) and *The Source of Self-Regard* (2019). The genesis of her play *Desdemona* dates back to a conversation reported by theatre director Peter Sellars, in which Morrison challenged him to direct *Othello*, a play which he found "disturbing" and in many ways dated.⁹ Morrison, on the contrary, felt that the play was particularly relevant to the plight of African Americans in the twenty-first century, claiming that "[b]eing an American today, it's not that they kill what you love, it's that they convince you to kill it,"¹⁰ very much in the way that Iago convinces Othello to kill Desdemona. Sellars went on to produce *Othello* in the United States in 2009, at the time of Obama's presidential inauguration. The smear campaign against the first black President of the United States, according to Sellars, offered fresh ground to discern the extreme vulnerability to deception and lies for a black man occupying a position of power. In turn, Sellars challenged Morrison to write her own version of the play and suggested her

⁸ See Stephen Clingman's chapter in this volume.

⁹ Peter Sellars, "Desdemona Takes the Microphone: Toni Morrison and Shakespeare's Hidden Women," *YouTube*, uploaded by UC Berkeley (28 October 2011), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G73AhP7Sfpg> (accessed 21 October 2020).

¹⁰ Reported in Sellars, "Desdemona Takes the Microphone."

collaboration with Traoré. Sellars's account proves that, like Phillips, Morrison had given long thought to the significance of *Othello* for black people in the West before she turned to write the play.

In discussing these two works, however, I am very much aware of their differences. Phillips has chosen to write a first-person narrative *paraquel*, examining Othello's frame of mind during his early days in Venice, before tragedy strikes. Morrison, on the other hand, has written a dramatic *sequel* to the original play, moving on from the tragic events to an afterlife that, though Desdemona-centred, is described as full of encounters among characters, some of whom might not even have met in their earthly lives as fictionally depicted by Shakespeare. Although the writers' handling of the common intertext may differ, they both address the politics of race in combination with gender and geography. Accordingly, my chapter looks into the gender politics of both texts, observing Phillips's literary struggle to expound on the psychology of black men living in the West and his attention to the manifold forms of racism to which they are exposed, but noting as well how Desdemona continues to be silenced. In contrast, Morrison's imagined afterlife not only provides both Desdemona and Othello with their own distinctive voices but also adds other female ones briefly mentioned in the original text. In addition, I argue that, in the context of Othello's double consciousness (European/African), Phillips's text is keen to explore the character's European surroundings, focusing on the geography and society of Venice to the extent that it becomes another major character alongside Othello himself, whereas Morrison's creative efforts are directed towards grafting some of the African roots that Shakespeare's play

had severed, closing the gap with pre-Middle Passage time through the use of sound, as Guarracino has perceptively pointed out.¹¹

For Shakespearean criticism as well as in the popular imagination, the themes of gender and race are inextricably bound together in *Othello*. As Ania Loomba contends, the play “is both a fantasy of interracial love and social tolerance, and a nightmare of racial hatred and male violence. [...] Othello is a victim of racial beliefs precisely because he becomes an agent of misogynist ones.”¹² Both themes – race and gender – are linked from the opening lines of the play, in the sexually-charged racial slurs used by Iago and Roderigo to inform Senator Brabantio of his daughter’s elopement with Othello. Yet, most critical analyses focus on Othello or Iago to the detriment of Desdemona, who remains, according to Peter Hollindale, “the most disregarded and underrated heroine in Shakespeare.”¹³ The critic goes on to describe two trends in the treatment of the character, either idealization (Desdemona as ‘love’s martyr’) or denigration (seeing her as naive and characterless).¹⁴ A case can easily be made for either perception,

¹¹ Serena Guarracino, “Africa as Voices and Vibes: Musical Routes in Toni Morrison’s *Margaret Garner* and *Desdemona*,” *Research in African Literatures* 46.4, special issue “What Is Africa to Me Now?,” ed. Bénédicte Ledent & Daria Tunca, (2015): 57.

¹² Ania Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002): 91.

¹³ Peter Hollindale, “Othello and Desdemona,” *Critical Survey* 1.1 (1989): 50.

¹⁴ Hollindale, “Othello and Desdemona,” 50.

particularly because Desdemona has few lines in the play.¹⁵ She has lived the sheltered life of a young woman of Venice's upper class at the time so she lacks experience and knowledge of the world, and she is murdered at the hands of her husband. Desdemona's development throughout the play resembles Othello's. Before the Senate, both lovers show their strength of character and respond with dignity to the charges brought forward by Brabantio.¹⁶ In respectful but determined tones, they both defend the legitimacy of their mutual love. Newly arrived in Cyprus, Desdemona whiles away the hours until Othello's arrival by engaging in playful banter with her companions, and is self-assured enough to counter Iago's misogynist statement that all women are wanton (II.1.110–11), an opinion that is voiced soon enough by Othello himself in his accusations of adultery (he calls her a "cunning whore of Venice" in IV.2.89). As the implicit violence against women (first verbal, then physical) comes into the open, Desdemona's mental strength gives way and she falls prey to apprehension and a dawning understanding of her own helplessness. The famous willow song scene that follows Othello's inexplicable outburst shows Desdemona at her lowest point, relying on the advice of the more experienced yet similarly downtrodden Emilia. In that conversation, Emilia gives a name to society's double standards for men and women (in words that resonate with Shylock's own speech against another set of double standards, those dividing Jews and Gentiles, in *The Merchant of Venice*):

Let husbands know

¹⁵ According to Emma Smith, Desdemona speaks only 11% of the total number of lines in the play, compared to Iago's 31% or Othello's 25%. See Emma Smith, *The Cambridge Shakespeare Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012): 138.

¹⁶ William Shakespeare, *Othello* (1603), ed. Norman Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984): I.3. Further references are in the main text.

Their wives have sense like them: they see, and smell,
And have their palates both for sweet and sour
As husbands have. What is it that they do
When they change us for others? Is it sport?
I think it is. And doth affection breed it?
I think it doth. Is 't frailty that thus errs?
It is so too. And have we not affections,
Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?
Then let them use us well; else let them know
The ills we do, their ills instruct us so.

iv.3.189–199

Emilia's splendid speech stands out not only due to its modern, proto-feminist ring, but also because women's desires, like their voices, are given very little space in Shakespeare's tragedy, and their lives are eventually snuffed out like the candle Othello holds as he looks over the form of his sleeping wife.

The starting point for the unnamed African General's first-person narrative in *The Nature of Blood* is precisely that juncture, a husband gazing upon his wife's body as she sleeps. Phillips has chosen to engage with Shakespeare's play through the events of Act I, that is, those unfolding in the eventful night of Othello and Desdemona's elopement. In this first-person fiction, the sleepless African General reminisces on the events since his arrival in Venice at the invitation of the Duke, thus allowing readers a comprehensive insight into his state of mind. The extended flashback constitutes the narrative equivalent to the soliloquy, a device characterizing Elizabethan drama in which the character's psychology is disclosed for the audience in a more direct manner than dialogue and interactive performance. The psychological portrait of the General dwells extensively on his impressions of Venetian society and customs in a way that, as

critics have observed, reverses the traditional white anthropological gaze by positioning Othello as the black subject and not the object.¹⁷ Yet, in Phillips's narrative, the impact of anti-black racism in Venetian society becomes stronger and harder to bear as months go by, particularly the openly derisive gestures and insolent looks of the General's Venetian attendant, a Iago-like, lower-class character for whom a black skin codes someone as inferior, regardless of their military standing, upbringing, or reputation.

Another salient topic in the General's introspection in *The Nature of Blood* is Venetian rites of courtship, which he at first evokes in a detached, slightly indifferent way, and then more keenly after meeting the unnamed senator's daughter. Although she initially strikes the General as an indistinctly modest, gentle damsel (in line with Brabantio's summary in *Othello* I.2.94: "a maiden, never bold"), she soon encroaches on his mind as he reflects upon the lonely life she must lead in her father's house; he eventually concludes that "she was, without doubt, the most beautiful treasure of Venice."¹⁸ Phillips here reimagines Othello and Desdemona's courtship, of which little is known in the play except for the scene in which the former eloquently explained to the Duke how they fell in love: "[S]he loved me for the dangers I had passed,/ And I loved her that she did pity them" (I.3.166–67). The African General's account paints a full picture with multiple meetings after the first, arranged by the senator's daughter with the aid of her servants.

¹⁷ See Ledent, *Caryl Phillips*, 159, and Maurizio Calbi, "'The Ghosts of Strangers': Hospitality, Identity and Temporality in Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood*," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 6.2 (2006): 44.

¹⁸ Caryl Phillips, *The Nature of Blood* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997): 129. Further references are in the main text after *NB*.

The lady's agentive behaviour starkly contrasts with Desdemona's, who operates under rigid codes that frame her as an eager listener only and leave her unable to do more than drop hints of her own desires. In contrast, this lady takes the lead in the courtship, perhaps sensitive to the foreigner's unfamiliarity with the local customs, initiating contact by means of a letter that invites him to a discreet meeting in her father's garden under the vigilant eye of a chaperone. This unprecedented move elicits from the General an expression of shock: "What strange ideas must be populating this lady's mind to take a chance and write such a letter" (*NB*, 133). During their first rendezvous, the General does indeed tell stories of "the dangers [he] had passed" (1.3.166–67) but he also questions the young woman about the puzzling social mores of his new abode. Towards the end of the scene in *The Nature of Blood*, there is a watershed moment when the man realizes the turn his affections are taking ("I knew that the stirring in my heart had deepened," *NB*, 134). The moment is sealed on the lady's side with a rich present, a heavily wrought gold bracelet that the General wears from then on, which Ledent interprets as being "at once a reminder of his bondage and a token of her love."¹⁹ Soon the secret meetings become more regular and the lady becomes even more reckless, to the point that she visits the General in his lodgings. After disclosing their mutual passion in their letter exchange, they start arrangements to elope "with both secrecy and haste" (*NB*, 145).

The wedding constitutes both an end and a beginning for the General. It puts an end to an African past that involved a former wife and a son, a family whose intruding presence he dismisses from his thoughts; they are entirely disposable for the purpose of his self-reinvention as a new Venetian, as he reveals on the day he is to accept the lady's hand:

¹⁹ Ledent, *Caryl Phillips*, 141.

The word *wife* still gave rise to much private concern, but I tried to flush this anxiety from my mind. I continually reminded myself that my native wife was not a *wife* in the manner that a Venetian might understand the term, yet I wondered if this were not simply a convenience of interpretation on my part. [...] As the afternoon drifted towards evening, I slowly discovered myself coming to terms with the fact that I might never again see the country of my birth. This purposed marriage did indeed mark me off from my past, and Venice, the birthplace of my wife, was a city that I might now have to consider home for what remained of my life.

NB, 146–47; italics in the original

The new beginning is not free of anxieties either, for he continues to wonder “if it were possible that, to this woman, a marriage to me was a mere Venetian whim” (*NB*, 147). Her Venetianness remains both a barrier to his trust and an empowering condition for his new identity. Similarly, the bride herself is described as “an object of beauty and danger” (*NB*, 148), a new possession that nevertheless remains impervious to its owner’s understanding by virtue of her difference, being both a woman and a Venetian. The narrator expresses bafflement and distrust; it seems impossible to bridge the gap between them and thus to fully trust her:

Truly, what am I to make of her? She lies here among twists of white linen sheeting. In her chastity, loyalty and honour, she is the most un-Venetian of women, yet is there some sport to this lady’s actions? I am familiar with the renowned deceit of the Venetian courtesan, yet I have taken a Venetian for a wife. Has some plot been hatched about me?

NB, 106

The representation of the senator's daughter as a motion-less, insentient, and unresponsive object, fixed under the General's introspective gaze, runs counter to the agency displayed by the lady during the courtship. Plot and representation are at odds here: the former would have us believe in an independent young lady who follows her own heart; the latter imposes closed meanings on her form and deprives her of her own voice and the possibility of talking back to such restrictive representation.

This becomes even more evident if we consider the repeated association of the lady to the city of Venice as a thing to be intimately known and therefore possessed. Venice, a multicultural hub in its own right during the sixteenth century,²⁰ is reminiscent for Phillips's readers, as Ledent has underlined, of post-colonial London. It was a city whose prosperity rested on the work of strangers such as Othello, "very much like the West Indian workforce in England after the Second World War."²¹ As Calbi rightly points out, in *The Nature of Blood* the city habitually connotes as a "she" and Desdemona's beauty synecdochically stands for that of Venice.²² Like the lady, the city is enigmatic, "refusing to reveal any clue as to where [its streets] might ultimately terminate" (*NB*, 132). The General's excitement at moving "from the edge of the world [...] to the centre [of the empire]" (*NB*, 107–08) is comparable to his exhilaration at having

²⁰ For the full picture of the representation of the cultural diversity of the Mediterranean and of Venice during the period, see Daniel Vitkus, *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570–1630* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

²¹ Ledent, *Caryl Phillips*, 152.

²² Calbi, "'The Ghosts of Strangers,'" 45.

conquered the senator's daughter, a young woman that many accomplished Venetian men had unsuccessfully attempted to woo. Moreover, the narration of their secret assignments is interspersed with his frequent walks in Venice by day and by night, taking in its beauty and splendour. The connection of the lady with the city through this parallel narrative structure is further reinforced by introducing a visual symmetry, for example in the description of Venice as a "sleeping babe upon whom one might spy with proprietorial glee" (*NB*, 121), a parallel that establishes an immediate association with the opening paragraphs of the General's introspection. Together with the character's determination to perform well before the Duke and the Senate, and with his efforts to assimilate through dress and speech, one may well agree with Michael Rothberg that the possession of the "fair prize" that is the senator's daughter is one more tool used by the African General to consolidate his identity as a black European success.²³ By opting for this depiction, Phillips has missed a chance to reimagine Desdemona as her own self, rather than the victim of Othello's distrust and the eventual target of his violence. As a result, the fiction keeps intact the gender dynamics of the original play.

As a matter of fact, one might want to stop and consider here not only what the author has kept, but what he has left out. Strikingly, all the overt signs of violence against women underlying the source text have been removed from this smooth narrative. By staying within the bounds of the Venetian section of the story, the verbal and physical violence experienced by Desdemona has been erased. Consequently, violence against women is left unaddressed. This fact is even more remarkable when one remembers that *The Nature of Blood* must have been written in the mid-1990s, that is, around the time of (or shortly after) O.J. Simpson's alleged

²³ Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 165–66.

murder of his wife in the US, when the media coverage of the trial dramatically raised the quantity and quality of social conversations concerning intimate partner violence in interracial couples.²⁴ According to Pechter, “many people [...] in and outside of academia, were intrigued by the resonance they thought they heard between *Othello* and the ‘crime of the century’ [which] was another piece of evidence to suggest the play’s unusual power to generate interest in our time.”²⁵ Phillipsian criticism to date has failed to discuss the implications of the author’s decision

²⁴ The murder happened in June of 1994 and the trial took place the following year. Phillips, who was already living in the US, could hardly have missed it. Intimate partner violence remains an issue in African American communities, where, according to Hampton, Oliver, and Magarian, it is more common than among white Americans. See Robert L. Hampton, William Oliver & Lucia Magarian, “Domestic Violence in the African American Community: An Analysis of Social and Structural Factors,” *Violence against Women* 9.5 (2003): 533–57. However, to date there are relatively few studies of intimate partner violence in interracial couples. See Rachel A. Fusco, “Intimate Partner Violence in Interracial Couples: A Comparison to White and Ethnic Minority Monoracial Couples,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 15.10 (2009): 1785–800. More than a decade later, studies claim that there is still “a knowledge gap about how the intersections of gender, race, culture, age, income, social class, and other identities shape Black women’s experiences of intimate partner violence” (Ingrid Waldron, Eileigh Storey–MacDougall, & Lori E. Weeks, “Hear My Cry: Breaking the Code of Silence around Intimate Partner Violence among Black Women in and beyond Midlife,” *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture and Social Justice* 42.1 (2021): 18).

²⁵ Edward Pechter, *Othello and Interpretive Traditions* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1999): 2.

to cut short Othello's story, perhaps with the exception of Rothberg, who feels that his story is so well known that Phillips "does not even need to narrate it" and instead displaces his suicide onto the Holocaust survivor, Eva.²⁶ It is noteworthy that for Rothberg, the crucial event in the story is Othello's suicide to the detriment of Desdemona's and Emilia's murders, which are at the heart of Shakespeare's tragedy and constitute the source of Othello's own undoing.

Whereas both Phillips's fiction and its critics uncouple the tangled histories of racism and misogyny in their source play, Morrison's *Desdemona* pursues the separate threads in that text and gives voice to its women characters without muting Othello. *Desdemona* is written in ten separate scenes, the first four of which recount Desdemona's childhood and Othello's courtship, therefore neatly intersecting with Phillips's own retelling. Morrison's technique is also close to Phillips's, insofar as the unfolding action is under the overall control of one viewpoint. However, instead of Othello's overarching gaze, here it is Desdemona who imparts meaning on events by remaining onstage from beginning to end and by channelling through her voice the perceptions and experiences of most of the other characters.²⁷

In the opening scene, Desdemona's self-introduction to the audience illustrates how Morrison's rendering departs from Shakespeare's:



²⁶ Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 168.

²⁷ For a detailed description of the play's acting and other performative features, see Ayanna Thompson, "Desdemona: Toni Morrison's Response to *Othello*," in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., ed. Dymphna Callaghan (London: Wiley, 2016): 494–506.

My name is Desdemona. The word, Desdemona, means misery. It means ill fated. It means doomed. Perhaps my parents believed or imagined or knew my fortune at the moment of my birth. Perhaps being born a girl gave them all they needed to know of what my life would be like. [...]

They were wrong. They knew the system, but they did not know me.

I am not the meaning of a name I did not choose.²⁸

Desdemona's strong assertion above overhauls the deeply entrenched image of this character in the popular imagination as a victim, someone "valued for her capacity to suffer silently," as Sellars has remarked.²⁹ Here, instead, she firmly refuses to be defined by suffering. This departure from the original text becomes increasingly clear in the following scenes, which provide more detail on the oppressive rules that she needed to obey as a child and on the rigid structures of decorum under which Desdemona had to learn to live within the walls of her parents' home: "Constraint was the theme of behavior. Duty was its plot" (*D*, 17). Confinement and obedience govern her entire life, spent yearning "for talk, for meaning, for winds from a wider world" (*D*, 22) and being courted by wealthy men who approached her just like "other virgins on the menu" (*D*, 21). On meeting Othello, however, she discovers that their bodies dancing together move "in such harmony it was as though we had known each other all our lives" (*D*, 23). She opens herself to love and joy:

DESDEMONA: And laughter is our teacher?

OTHELLO: And our flesh is its lesson.

²⁸ Toni Morrison, *Desdemona*, Lyrics by Rokia Traoré (London: Oberon, 2012): 13. Further references are in the main text after *D*.

²⁹ Sellars, "Desdemona Takes the Microphone."

DESDEMONA: Then let my flesh be re-born through yours.

OTHELLO: Having captured glee, we melt and become one.

DESDEMONA: I adore you.

OTHELLO: I love you. Turn away old world, while my love and I create a new one.

D, 25

Morrison, like Phillips, celebrates the pleasures of the physical union of two lovers strikingly different in bodies and histories. However, in Morrison's text, Othello and Desdemona give themselves unreservedly to each other and we find none of the qualms expressed by the African General in *The Nature of Blood*.

Furthermore, Morrison's story (unlike Phillips's) develops beyond this point. In the remaining scenes, the play becomes more complex as Desdemona's initial monologue, which had turned into a dialogue with Othello, is followed by encounters with or between other characters, among them women that had hardly featured – if at all – in Shakespeare's play. This is the case of Desdemona's mother, M. Brabantio, and Othello's mother, Soun, who are briefly mentioned in the original play and who in Morrison's work meet in scene 5 as they mourn for their children. Even though they look at one another, at first, as enemies, they realize later that they have much in common. Desdemona's mother's maid Barbary – from whom Desdemona learnt the willow song – and her own maid Emilia also make an appearance, serving as powerful reminders that race and class play an important role in dividing women. Barbary starts by challenging a name that, like Desdemona's, is charged with unwanted meanings: "Barbary is what you call Africa. Barbary is the geography of the foreigner, the savage. [...] Barbary is the name of those without whom you could neither live nor prosper" (*D*, 45). Her real name is Sa'ran, meaning Joy, a name that in its tragic irony (she dies of sorrow after being abandoned by her lover) links her to Desdemona. Like Desdemona, Sa'ran determinedly rejects misery and

insists that she now has a new song. By contrast, Emilia is the target of Desdemona's accusations of deception and betrayal. She counters them by reasoning that the downtrodden can expect no help except from themselves when facing multiple dangers: "The long hours of servility in the grand halls of mistresses, the rush to hide from lascivious men – including your husband – the vulnerability, the ever-present danger" (D, 44). As Jo Carney suggests, Morrison has refocused the characters in the original play *Othello* by "ascrib[ing] interiority to the female characters [and] more fully imagin[ing] and complicat[ing] Desdemona's relationships with them."³⁰ This is why, for Sellars, *Desdemona* performs an "unsilencing of women."³¹

Even more importantly for our purposes here, the play grapples with the pivotal issue of violence against women. In scene 6, Othello recounts his past as an orphaned child enslaved by Syrians and later sold into an army in which "[r]ape was perfunctory. Death our brother" (D, 36). His bond with Iago derives from the acts of horror they performed together, among which the gang rape of two old women, an act that produced a complex form of gratification. Othello confesses: "The look between us [Othello and Iago] was not to acknowledge shame, but mutual pleasure. Pleasure in the degradation we had caused; more pleasure in leaving a witness to it. We were not only refusing to kill our own memory, but insisting on its life in another" (D, 38). Similarly, the closing scene scrutinizes Desdemona's murder by Othello. He asks why she so meekly accepted her fate:

OTHELLO: Why did you let my rage run free? Why did you deny I murdered you?

³⁰ Jo Eldridge Carney, "‘Being Born a Girl’: Toni Morrison's *Desdemona*," *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation* 9.1 (2014): 10.

³¹ Sellars, "Desdemona Takes the Microphone."

DESDEMONA: You were not killing me. You were killing Othello. The man I believed you to
be was lost to me. So what was left to struggle for?

D, 50

Although violence against women is laid bare and condemned, Morrison envisions the afterlife not as a space for retaliation, but as a space of growing. Peter Erickson has remarked how the author is so “closely attuned to the dynamic of female speech and silence in Shakespeare’s play”³² that she counters Othello’s claim in the original play that it is too late (for words, for reparation, for life) with Desdemona’s assertion that “‘Late’ has no meaning here” (D, 55). In an interview conducted at the Hay Festival in 2016, Morrison explained the potential of this timeless continuum for characters to better understand their life events and the people in them. She emphasized the word “knowledge” because knowledge takes time that often people do not have.³³ By contrast, the afterlife affords a second chance to perform what Erickson calls “a postmortem exploration of their [Othello and Desdemona’s] relationship.”³⁴ As Morrison’s Desdemona makes clear: “I am sick of killing as a solution. It solves nothing. Questions nothing, produces nothing, nothing, but more of itself” (D, 54). This timeless space affords her the

³² Peter Erickson, “‘Late’ has no meaning here’: Imagining a Second Chance in Toni Morrison’s *Desdemona*,” *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation* 8.1 (2013): 3.

³³ Toni Morrison, “Making Time,” *Vimeo*, uploaded by Hay Festival (2016), <http://vimeo.com/163110732> (accessed 21 October 2020).

³⁴ Erickson, “‘Late’ has no meaning here’,” 3.

possibility of growth; in each of the difficult conversations she holds with other characters, she comes away with the kernel of a dawning understanding.³⁵

Finally, one should mention another way in which Phillips's and Morrison's renderings of Shakespeare's *Othello* markedly differ. *The Nature of Blood* is a work which "foregrounds the writer's European sensibility and leaves Africa [and America] in an unobtrusive but looming background."³⁶ Indeed, as argued above, the General strives to push all features of his African past to the very margins of his consciousness. In contrast, critics of Morrison's *Desdemona* have praised the way in which the author resists the pull to ventriloquize Africa and "brings [it] back into focus by reshaping our dialogue with it."³⁷ The Africanness of *Desdemona*, however, does not take quite the same shape as the Europeanness of the African General's introspective narrative. Venice and its splendid architecture, which were given ample space in *The Nature of Blood*, have no tangible counterpart in *Desdemona* at all; the brief memories that the protagonist shares with the audience about the claustrophobic domesticity of her childhood fail to convey any particularity, and they could in fact describe the arrangements of any upper-class household throughout Europe at the time. Nor do we find any trace of architecture (Venetian or African) on *Desdemona*'s stage. Instead, Sellars set up a loosely evocative staging that, in joining other creative elements, manages to convey a distinctively African feel. Thus, even if the stage

³⁵ Thompson, "Desdemona: Toni Morrison's Response to *Othello*," 500.

³⁶ Ledent, *Caryl Phillips*, 137.

³⁷ Lenore Kitts, "The Sound of Change: A Musical Transit through the Wounded Modernity of *Desdemona*," in *Toni Morrison: Memory and Meaning*, ed. Adrienne Lanier Seward & Justine Tally (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2014): 258.

standing for the afterlife is fairly bare, it strategically displays glass, characteristic of some African funeral traditions. African events, landscapes (pertaining to Othello's childhood), and characters (Othello's mother and Sa'ran/Barbary), already described above, feature prominently, displacing or even altogether replacing Venice and European characters. In fact, the cast of European characters beyond Desdemona herself is largely reduced. Cassio becomes a disembodied voice projected from offstage (he is, after all, still alive) and Iago only lives on in Othello's clear but distant memories. Among Desdemona's close circle, only her mother (replacing her father Brabantio's forbidding presence in Shakespeare's tragedy) and her maid Emilia are given a chance to speak. Moreover, all the actors on stage wear the same garment, a white shift, except for the grieving mothers, one of whom wears "a simple cloth" whereas the other is attired "in a sumptuous gown" (*D*, 26). These different attires emphasize the way some cultural differences remain visible beyond the grave, even as they are not an obstacle to mutual understanding. Last but not least, Traoré's music and singing, which include adaptations and performances of traditional Malian songs using West African instruments, enter into a rich conversation with Morrison's words.

In her article on masculinity in Phillips's fiction, Ledent identifies a striking absence in Phillipsian criticism, expressing surprise at the fact that "Phillips's essentially character-driven fiction has rarely been examined from a gender perspective, let alone in the context of masculinity, especially when one considers that it has, at the same time, often been praised,

albeit mostly in passing, for its sensitive and sympathetic depiction of female protagonists.”³⁸

This essay has attempted to fill this gap through the analysis of the appropriation of Shakespeare’s *Othello* in Phillips’s *The Nature of Blood* in comparison to Morrison’s *Desdemona*. While, needless to say, both are accomplished and moving works of art in their own right, at the same time they complete the source text by reimagining Othello and Desdemona and expanding what we know of them, thus turning them into more fully fleshed, engaging characters. Phillips’s introspective narrative focuses on the African General’s anxieties over his new, precarious position as an outsider serving Venice and marrying into its upper-class echelon. His is a powerful attempt to explain the historical conditions for the existence of male blackness within white Europe. In contrast, Morrison’s play has been defined as “a womanist attempt to give Desdemona a stronger voice.”³⁹ Her work seeks to explain neither blackness nor whiteness, but takes Africanness as a given and suggests that cultural differences can be successfully negotiated. Morrison has managed to insert plural subjectivities and to attend to the pervasive issue of violence against women, striving to counter the combined evils of racism and misogyny underlying Shakespeare’s *Othello*. In conclusion, both Phillips and Morrison examine in rich detail the race, class, and gender tensions that underlie their source text, mapping complex affective geographies of belonging and deeply entangled relationalities.

³⁸ Bénédicte Ledent, “Of Invisible Men and Native Sons: Male Characters in Caryl Phillips’ Fiction,” in *Configuring Masculinity in Theory and Literary Practice*, ed. Stephan Horlacher (Leiden & Boston: Brill/Rodopi, 2015): 252.

³⁹ Claire Chambers, “‘To Love the Moor’: Postcolonial Artists Write Back to Shakespeare’s *Othello*,” *Postcolonial Interventions* 1.2 (2016): 11.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge the support provided for the writing of this essay by the following agencies: Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, the European Regional Development Fund, and the Spanish Research Agency (Research Project “Bodies in Transit 2: Genders, Mobilities, Interdependencies,” ref. FFI2017-84555-C2-1-P).

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