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Get Out and the Remediation of Othello's Sunken Place: Beholding White Supremacy's Coagula

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Abstract

As a result of director and writer Jordan Peele's remediation of the horror genre to create a racially polemic film, breakout horror-thriller *Get Out* (2017) has achieved critical and commercial success while substantially affecting how Americans think about and approach race. As stories about a black man amidst an all-white community who ultimately strangles his white female lover, *Get Out* and Shakespeare's *Othello* share obvious narrative overlaps. *Othello*, however, maintains a more tenuous status regarding race and its function within the storyline than does *Get Out*. *Othello* remains a play mired in questions about how or even whether it can be staged (or filmed) in a way that shakes off its legacy of vexed racial dynamics. *Get Out* does not suffer from such questioning; instead, it achieves the difficult feat of spurring multicultural audiences to root for the black Chris Washington (Daniel Kaluuya) as he successfully murders the Armitages, a neoliberal, upper-middle-class white family. *Get Out*'s unexpected success, I argue, suggests a powerful framework for reorienting how we conceive of *Othello*'s racial dynamics to imagine more ethically the play and its racial representation in the 21st century. Specifically, through its central concepts of the "coagula" and "the sunken place" — concepts that explain the visceral threats of whiteness upon black individuals — the film articulates a racial framework that places blame for Othello's extreme responses not on his blackness, but rather on the physiological and psychological violence enacted upon him by white supremacy. Thus, using *Get Out* as a framework for reconsidering *Othello* opens up a means of remediating the racial representation that continues to haunt Shakespeare's tragedy. [1]

A black protagonist lives in an overwhelmingly white community and embodies a valuable skill coveted by white counterparts. He journeys to a threatening locale and over the course of roughly 24 hours, develops a paranoia fostered by white antagonism. Ultimately, he murders these antagonists and strangles his young, white female lover. For those with a pulse on popular American culture, these plot details invoke writer and director Jordan Peele's 2017 breakout horror-thriller *Get Out*. For the Shakespeare scholar, however, these same particulars outline, if only loosely, *Othello*. But a provocative difference exists between the texts; even though both stories end with a

white woman strangled by a black man, *Othello* remains a play mired in questions about whether and how it can be presented in ways that shake off its legacy of vexed racial dynamics. *Get Out*, however, does not suffer from such questioning; instead, it achieves the difficult feat of spurring multicultural audiences to root for the black Chris Washington (Daniel Kaluuya) as he murders the Armitages, an upper-middle-class, politically liberal, white family.[2] In an era of racial strife, calls for social justice, and an ever-growing attention to the role of Shakespeare studies in broader cultural discussions of race, we must grapple with *whether* and *how* *Othello*'s racial politics should be envisioned across a range of spaces, from the theater to the screen to the classroom. In an interview with NPR's Code Switch, Ayanna Thompson, for instance, argues that "there are three toxic plays that resist rehabilitation and appropriation that are written by Shakespeare," one of which she claims is *Othello*, a play that due to its "deep racism" ends up "circling us back to a really regressive and uncomfortable standpoint" (Thompson 2019).[3] *Get Out*'s unexpected success indicates that there may be efficacious ways to re-mediate and therefore reimagine *Othello* in the 21st century. In fact, I propose that *Get Out* proves an important tool for reorienting how scholars, teachers, and a wide range of adaptors conceive of *Othello*'s racial dynamics. In turn, this reorientation allows for the possibility of re-mediating the tragedy by tapping into a more thoughtful racial narrative than the "noble Moor to savage" trope that haunts even modern instantiations of the play.[4]

Indeed, *Get Out* provides a counterpoint that allows one to consider *Othello* in a way that privileges the black experience over the more familiar white one. Specifically, through its central concepts of the "coagula" and "the sunken place" — concepts that explain the social threats to and psychology of black individuals amidst a predominant and predatory white culture — the film articulates a racial framework that illuminates how and why Othello experiences the plot of the play differently than those around him. *Get Out* literalizes the horror of Othello's racial experience by stressing white supremacy's physical and psychological appropriation of and violence against black bodies, as well as the strategies that weaken black selfhood in order to make it susceptible to this white bodily and mental appropriation. *Get Out* specifically spotlights microaggressions as one of these strategies. Thus, if we use *Get Out* as a framework for reconsidering *Othello*, just as Peele re-mediated the horror genre in order to reorient its focus on white narratives and bodies onto black ones, we can re-mediate *Othello*'s narrative representation into one that no longer raises questions about a black man's humanity but rather focuses attention on the racist inhumanity directed against him through the shifting, potent tools of white supremacy.

White Supremacy and the Appropriation of the Black Body

Get Out follows African-American Chris who joins his white girlfriend, Rose (Allison Williams), for a weekend to visit her family for the first time — a family, he learns, unaware that he is black. Rose assures Chris of her family's liberal, anti-racist *bonafides*. Yet Chris feels unease as he meets Walter (Marcus Henderson) and Georgina (Betty Gabriel), the friendly, if odd, black help. His apprehension increases after Missy Armitage (Catherine Keener), a psychologist, hypnotizes him in order to help him quit smoking. The film reveals that the Armitages have chosen Chris as their next victim for a process and product they invented called the coagula, a white brain surgically implanted into a black body so that an aging or physically ailing white person can live on. A piece of the black brain, and thus black self, remains, however, which necessitates the sunken place — the psychological corner reserved for the hypnotized, appropriated black identity where the victim sees what occurs but cannot respond. Chris miraculously escapes, killing the family in the process, including Rose, whom he strangles minutes before his friend, Rod Williams (Lil Rel Howery) rescues him.

Peele's film began as a rebuttal against claims of a post-racial America following Barack Obama's historical 2008 election, only later morphing into a horror movie that functions as a pointed commentary on the oppressive experiences of black Americans. He explains, "what originally started as a movie to combat the lie that America had become post-racial became a movie where the cat is out of the bag . . . It became . . . more about trying to offer us a hero out of this turmoil, to offer escape and joy" (Zinoman 2017). Made on a 4.5-million-dollar budget, the film achieved commercial and critical success, earning $254.3 million, garnering four Academy Award nominations, and winning the Oscar for Best Original Screenplay (Ramos 2018). Most significantly, this transformative film reimagines the horror genre, re-mediating it not in the narrow sense of moving to a new medium but rather in the more expansive sense of redressing or remedying, in this case, traditional horror films' centering of whiteness and marginalization of blackness. For instance, *Get Out*'s black protagonist survives the film, thereby rewriting the classic *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), whose black main character, Ben, successfully fends off zombies only to be shot in the conclusion. Through his refocusing, then, Peele created a racially polemic narrative that has reshaped the ways we approach race in both media and culture at large.

Through the concept of the coagula, *Get Out* viscerally confronts modern society's violent appropriation of black bodies, which can help one reconsider Othello's service to the Venetian state and his tragic end.[5] Ta-Nehisi Coates addresses precisely this violence, arguing that the "elevation" of whiteness comes through "the pillaging of life, liberty, labor, and land; through the flaying of backs; the chaining of limbs; the strangling of dissidents; the destruction of families; the rape of

mothers; the sale of children; and various other acts meant, first and foremost, to deny you and me the right to secure and govern our own bodies" (Coates 2015, 8). Coates further admonishes, "You must never look away from this. You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body" (10). *Get Out* refuses to allow one to look away, for this violence functions as the Armitages' *modus operandi* as they seek to create more coagula, demonstrated most notably through André, Walter, and Georgina. The film's first horror moment depicts André, a secondary character, walking at night in an all-white suburb. As he tries to find an address, a car makes a u-turn, pulling up in front of him. When he passes it, a person wearing a medieval-style iron mask exits the car, chokes him out, and stuffs him in the trunk. We later learn this is Jeremy Armitage (Caleb Landry Jones), who uses violent methods of accruing black subjects. As we watch André's body crumple, unsure whether he survived the attack, we cannot escape the film's emphasis on the violence against black bodies. André later reappears as Logan. Chris takes his picture when he identifies André and attempts to send photo evidence to Rod, the process of which fleetingly liberates André from the sunken place. This moment likewise traumatizes the black body, as signaled by the nosebleed that accompanies the look of awakening on his face. It suggests that once devastated by white hands, the black body continues to be wounded, even as the self within that body strives for recognition.

As André disappears from the film's narrative, Peele moves attention to Walter and Georgina, who likewise stress the seizure of and harm to black bodies. Walter the gardener is actually Rose's grandfather, and his frame bears the scars of the surgery as exposed when he removes his hat near the film's conclusion. More poignantly, Chris takes his picture, which momentarily allows the real "Walter" to emerge for an instant; in his brief window of self-recognition, he turns the shotgun he has only moments before fixed on Chris upon himself, shooting himself in the head. He destroys the brain that controls his body but must annihilate the only vestige of who he was in the process. Violence begets violence, creating a circle of harm from which, the film suggests, black individuals struggle and many times fail to escape.

Georgina, actually Rose's grandmother, also reminds the viewer of the physical devastation enacted on black bodies. Her scar, her pressed, formal hair, and her elderly woman's attire all contrast with a photo Chris finds of Georgina, pre-surgery, posing with Rose; the selfie shows her with a Millennial pout, luscious natural curls, and contemporary clothes. All facets of her previous self have been stripped away, the hidden scar the only tell-tale sign. But perhaps most notable is her ultimate destruction. As Chris flees the Armitage's house, he crashes his car into her. Chris glances at her form on the ground, which triggers remembrances of his mother, who died alone, on the side of the road after being hit by a car when Chris was a boy. This identification points

to Chris's personal struggles, but it also suggests that for him, Georgina is not the white brain inside but rather the black woman signaled by her physical appearance. Chris thus sees hope for black subjectivity despite its appropriation by whiteness. As a result, he attempts to save her. His recognition of her potential black selfhood juxtaposes with Rose, who exits the house declaring, "Grandma," indicating that for her, the white interior supersedes the woman's black exterior. The camera returns to the car, where Georgina's wig slides off, thereby emphasizing the surgical scar marring her forehead. She revives, grabbing Chris and screaming, "You ruined my house!" Despite Chris's attempts, the eradication of the black self who once inhabited the woman next to him is complete. Through Georgina then, the film comments on the ramifications of white domination over black bodies. Once part of the coagula, the black self becomes unrecoverable. As demonstrated through both Walter and Georgina, the only answer is to destroy the black body that houses the white self; the destruction of blackness must be totalizing. This is the logical extreme of the violence Coates argues permeates the treatment of black bodies in America. As a broader framework, then, the coagula makes all viewers — those already cognizant and those woefully not so — hyperaware of the constant physical and metaphysical threat whiteness poses to blackness.

In addition to stressing the corporeal and mental ramifications of the white appropriation of black bodies, the coagula also demonstrates the white brain's overpowering nature, a literalization of the way that a white view of the world governs the black experience. Sociologist Joe R. Feagin calls this the "white racial frame": the "white worldview" dominant "throughout the country and, indeed, in much of the Western world" that through wide-ranging methods crafts "a strong positive orientation to whites and whiteness . . . and a strong negative orientation to racial 'others' who are exploited and oppressed" (Feagin 2013, 3, 10). Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva notes how in the U.S., this framework is white supremacy (Bonilla-Silva 2014, 11). A confrontation between Chris and Georgina powerfully communicates this white domination. In the midst of the Armitage's party, Chris tells Georgina: "All I know is sometimes, if there's too many white people, I get nervous, you know?" In this moment, Georgina's true self struggles to appear as indicated by the fact that her smile falls as she trembles and cries, never taking her eyes off Chris. But grandma's brain overcomes this temporary lapse, as signaled by the return of the oversized grin when she responds, "No . . . no . . . no, no, no no no [10 times] . . . That's not my experience. Not at all." Upon first viewing, the repeated "no's" seem meant for Chris, but considered in light of the film's big reveal, these "no's" may also serve as a command of repression for the young woman whose body hosts grandma's white mind. White control over the black self may lapse for a moment, but the dynamic here makes it clear that in the coagula, the white brain demands totalizing authority, thereby embodying white supremacy's sociological dynamics.

White Supremacy and Service in *Othello*

As an indicator of the physical, mental, and sociological effects of white supremacy upon black selfhood, the coagula provides a lens through which we can re-consider Othello's role as a black man navigating the white-dominated Venetian society. For individuals creating modernized performances or other contemporary adaptations, this lens can help them more thoughtfully integrate issues of race by considering how "universal" themes such as jealousy and love have meanings contingent upon race. For those engaging with the play in more traditional forms, professors working in the classroom or undertaking historically focused research for instance, making connections between *Get Out*'s coagula and *Othello* may seem more of stretch given the contemporary dynamics informing Peele's films. This distinction, however, offers an interrogative opportunity rather than a methodological barrier. This is not to say that race and whiteness function in exactly the same ways during early modernity as they do in the film. Yet as Peter Erickson and Kim F. Hall note, the early modern and the modern "are not two completely separate compartments to keep strictly disconnected" (Erickson and Hall 2016, 6). Thus, placing *Othello* and *Get Out* in conversation with each other, or at least having the racial dynamics of the latter inform one's reading of the former, invites "cross-historical" tracing that might foster reflection upon what strategies for Othering may have been successful in the early modern period, and in *Othello* more specifically, even if there was not a precise vocabulary to define them.[6]

Despite differences in historical context, form, and narrative structure, one productive similarity between the film and the play is the way that, like Walter and Georgina, Othello too is deployed in the service of whiteness. Ambereen Dadabhoy stresses the dominating nature of this service, arguing "His narrative enslavement 'by the insolent foe' and subsequent 'redemption' supposes his free-alien status in Venice, yet his commitment to Venice's imperial wars signals an obligation to the state that exceeds volunteer, or even paid, mercenary service. Venice, it seems, can (and does) deploy him with impunity" (Dadabhoy 2014, 13). Though unstaged, Brabantio's hospitality demonstrates the self-serving nature of the Venetians' engagements with Othello, for Brabantio's welcome of him and his exotic tales finds its limit when the threat of miscegenation looms. Not only does Othello work for a coterie of all-white Venetians who order him at will, but as a Christianized Moor opposing the Turks, he also champions Christianity and its function as a force at once civilizing (for the converted) yet exclusionary (against the unconverted). In other words, because the play portrays a contest for power between Venetian Christians and Muslim Turks, and because it lands on the side of the Christians, *Othello* concomitantly stresses the supremacy of whiteness through entrenched associations with Christianity. As Dennis Britton

explains, Ethiopians, Moors, Turks, and Jews were "dually recognized in the early modern period as figures of alterity, which [were] made to stand for modes of experience and being that [were] foreign to normative white Christianity" (Britton 2014, 3). In his role as a solider, Othello therefore defends not just Venice or Christianity but whiteness as well. Thus, in civil and interpersonal contexts, Othello — like *Get Out*'s André, Walter, and Georgina — serves whiteness in both a literal and ideological sense.

While the terms of "service" may differ for Othello and the bodily proxies in *Get Out*, the resistance to it remains similar. Like Walter, Othello sees suicide as the only way to free himself from his entrapment by a white antagonist, in this case, Iago, but perhaps the Venetian state as well. Erickson, for example, reads Othello's closing speech as a denunciation of his service, his suicide an "[implicit rejection of] the entire racial formulation on which his career was based" so that, similar to Walter in *Get Out*, "At the cost of death, he takes back the power to define his own identity" (Erickson 2002, 144). Re-reading the play's ending through the dynamics stressed by the coagula strengthens this interpretation. Suicide no longer functions as a generic feature of tragedy nor as a means for Othello to reclaim his honor. Rather, Othello's suicide becomes his confrontation of his racial marginalization by Iago and his strategic use by the white Venetian state.

In fact, such an understanding of Othello opens up the possibility of interpreting him as a black man whose brain figuratively undergoes the coagula process of whitening his identity, only to grapple with the ramifications of that process in his final moments. Dadabhoy reads Othello in precisely this way, arguing that "the duality of Othello's visage points to a psychological fairness belied by his somatic one" (Dadabhoy 2014, 122). Britton too stresses how "Venetian imperial interests necessitate an Othello who is 'more fair than black (1.3.291)'" (Britton 2014, 128). If we accept this premise, then Othello mirrors those who have undergone the coagula process in that he is a white mind within a black body. As the film makes clear, the coagula ultimately entails a marginalization of black selfhood. This is precisely Othello's journey in the play, so much so that he disavows his own name — "That's he that was Othello. Here I am" (5.2.292) — becoming, like Walter and Georgina hosts, individuals traumatized by whiteness.

Get Out stresses the violence inflicted upon black bodies as part of this process much more so than *Othello*. Even so, the concept of the coagula as presented in *Get Out* asserts that in a predominantly white society, the black individual, though not technically a slave, is not truly free but rather constantly under potential threat. If applied to Othello, this dynamic can inform, to some degree, *why* Othello might believe Iago's assertions about Desdemona, despite the lack of firm evidence. Certainly, gender dynamics play a role here.[7] But so do racial ones. If, for example, a

production or adaptation can help audiences perceive Othello as living within a culture where white individuals consistently use black bodies without discretion, and at the expense of black selfhood, then his belief of Iago becomes more understandable. It is not that Iago is particularly trustworthy or convincing; rather, he confirms a truth Othello already knows not about Desdemona specifically but about the white world in which he resides: if one is not sufficiently white, then one cannot be integrated and is therefore easily disposable.

Microaggressions and Black Paranoia

In addition to providing a way of understanding Othello's relationship with the white society around him, *Get Out* can also help audiences garner insight into Othello's state of mind and his attendant vulnerability by directing attention to the persistent microaggressions that stress black identity, thereby priming it for white appropriation. Derald Wing Sue explains that "[m]icroaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership" (Sue 2010, 3). According to Sue, microaggressions become difficult to identify and confront due to "their invisibility to perpetrators and oftentimes the recipients" (6). Microaggressions can take three forms: those that articulate conscious bias (microassaults), those that unconsciously insult a person's identity (microinsults), and those that invalidate a person's thoughts, feelings, and beliefs (microinvalidations) (8-9). With this context in mind, one can see that Chris experiences all three forms of microaggressions. Whether coming from the Armitages or their friends, these microaggressions marginalize Chris, reminding him of his blackness while fetishizing it. A litany of seemingly small occurrences emphasize Chris's status as Other: a policeman asks for his license after an accident even though he was not driving; Dean refers to Chris's romance with Rose as a "thang" and continuously calls him "my man"; Jeremy comments on his physical strength over dinner; at the party, the Greens discuss Tiger Woods with him, while later, Lisa squeezes his arm and pecs, asking, "Is it true . . . Is it [sex with a black man] better?", and another guest references the fact that "Black [skin color] is in fashion." These occurrences exemplify both microaggressions and their constant presence, a presence with psychological and physiological implications.

Indeed, analyzing how *Get Out* deploys microaggressions reveals Peele's attention to their overwhelming effect upon the marginalized person. Chris moves from one racial conversation to the next during the fete, so that while he can smile away the initial reference to Tiger Woods, by the time the guest references black skin, his stony face signals his disgust. For Chris, these microaggressions coupled with the moment where André/Logan warns "Get out" drive him to

insist to Rose that they leave her parents' house. Microaggressions "can signal a hostile or invalidating climate that threatens the physical and emotional safety of the devalued group" (Sue 2010, 15,16), which is precisely what happens to Chris. Even within the party's short time frame, the film vividly expresses the mental toll microaggressions take upon their recipients. Sue notes how microaggressions create four different kinds of stressful effects: biological and physical (e.g. increased stress and heart problems), emotional (e.g. depression and mental health issues), cognitive (e.g. stereotype threat or disrupted cognition), and behavioral (e.g. aggression and hypervigilance) (15, 16). Of all the effects Peele stresses, the most obvious for Chris is what Sue characterizes as "suspiciousness toward the majority group," or stated differently, paranoia, in Chris's case, towards whiteness. The film in fact invites reflection on the justifiable nature of black paranoia through Rod, whose admonitions that Chris has been kidnapped by a white family appear paranoid to the cops he attempts to report to but instead come across as prescient to the viewer. Thus, the paranoia fostered in Chris by the party proves to be an intense instantiation of the mistrust black individuals must grapple with daily amidst the dominance of whiteness, a suspicion, the film suggests, not only understandable but also crucial for protecting the physical and mental black self under continuous threat.

The way racial microaggressions contextualize black paranoia provides a means of better comprehending Othello's mental state. Indeed, Erickson's discussion of the racialized language in *Othello* noted above echoes the dynamics of microaggressions. But before re-considering the implications of the Duke's and Desdemona's respective racial assertions, it bears revisiting some of the more explicitly racist language in the play in order to consider its contribution toward Othello's state of mind as the tragedy advances. While audiences or readers experience Iago's and Roderigo's racist diatribes first, Othello does not face racialized language directly until confronted by Brabantio. Iago has already primed Othello by stressing the "scurvy and provoking terms / Against your honor" that Brabantio has supposedly deployed (Shakespeare 1.2.7-8). Even as these lines reveal Iago's perfidy, they also signal how Othello must negotiate his Otherness from his introduction. Almost immediately, Othello experiences a direct microassault from Brabantio as the seething father denigrates Othello for his marriage to Desdemona. Brabantio's invective against Othello begins with terms not racial in and of themselves as he castigates Othello by declaring him a "foul thief" and "Damned as thou art" (1.3.63, 64). By the time Brabantio notes that Desdemona rejected "wealthy curled darlings of our nation" for Othello's "sooty bosom," his argument turns into a microassault, for his speech exposes his bias *against* Othello precisely because Brabantio devalues Othello's social positionality due to his racial Otherness. Othello expresses confidence in his "services which I have done the seigniory," and in doing so, suggests his integration in

Venetian society via his role as one of its foremost martial protectors (1.2.18). Yet Brabantio attempts to dismantle this integration by contrasting Othello with the men of "our nation." It is the language of nationhood before nationhood fully flourished, the "our" implying an excluded "you," an unsurprising tactic given that, as Arthur Little Jr. explains, "In the self-preserving instinct of Shakespeare's Venice or Shakespeare's England, a white woman's marrying a black man . . . amounts to nothing less than a violation of national proportions" (Little 2000, 87). As the logic of Brabantio's berating of Othello makes clear, the "our" here encompasses him and Desdemona, and perhaps even the officers of the state called to bring Othello to the Duke; it does not, however, include Othello. In comparison to the "darlings" of Venice, Othello only merits the status of "a *thing* as thou" (emphasis added). By using the familiar "thou" following "thing," Brabantio does not signal intimacy but rather attempts discursively to affirm his superiority over Othello. Though Othello depends on his rank within Venice for status, Brabantio deploys language in order to reassert the social hierarchy he believes Othello challenges. Brabantio's microassault reveals that his bias against Othello marrying his daughter derives not from the potentially dishonorable act of elopement itself but instead from Othello's secondary status as a "sooty . . . thing." As a result, Brabantio must reassert that marginalization through his demeaning, objectifying discourse.

In addition to revealing that Othello experiences a microassault directly, this moment also indicates that as much as Othello may *seem* integrated into Venetian society, this integration always rests on uneasy ground, one easily disrupted by anything that challenges the white-dominated status quo. Thus, it is not difficult to suggest that in this moment we see the genesis of Othello's paranoia, for this is the very argumentation, indeed even some of the very lines, that Iago uses in 3.3 that cause Othello to shift from a man unbothered by other men's praise of his wife to a man consumed by the "green-eyed monster" (3.3.180). Put differently, Brabantio's microassault not only places Othello in a mental and social position of stress as he discusses his elopement with the Duke, but it also creates the suspicion and self-doubt upon which Iago will so insidiously capitalize.

Brabantio's microassault serves as the most extreme version of the comments that appear in the Duke's presence as the Venetians confront the Turkish threat and Othello's marriage. In other words, the binaries that Brabantio's speech establishes for Othello between black and white, Other and Venetian, unworthy thing and person worthy of affection, unnatural and natural, become mirrored in less virulent ways during 1.3. As such, microinsults pair with this microassault to create a series of contiguous moments, where, like Chris, Othello must grapple with microaggressions. Erickson helpfully reminds us that because the play opens with Iago's and Roderigo's starkly racist language, "we are in danger of seeing this vicious rhetoric as the whole story of race in the play" (Erickson 2002, 137). Yet even the discourse of "'positive'" characters such as Desdemona

and the Duke demonstrates "subtle versions of prejudice along a spectrum of prejudicial white views," or to use Sue's framing, microinsults that expose an unconscious bias, in this case, against blackness (Erickson 2002, 137).

The Duke's and Desdemona's respective comments mirror the racial formulations articulated in *Get Out* by those who, at least on the surface, seem progressive about racial difference, such as the Armitages. Rose stresses her family's liberal politics; her father would have voted for Obama three times, she explains in order to quell Chris's fears about her parents' potential racial prejudice. But as the film's plot unfolds, this liberality proves to be an alluring façade hiding insidious intent. Peele articulates his interest in shining a spotlight on precisely this population: "The liberal elite who communicates that we're not racist in any way is as much of the problem as anything else. This movie is about the lack of acknowledgement that racism exists," he notes (Zinoman 2017). The Duke and Desdemona are by no means the Armitages. Even so, their articulations of racial difference also bear scrutiny, for as Sue explains, microaggressions arise even more commonly from *unconscious bias*, a dynamic present in both the Duke's and Desdemona's comments about Othello, which follow Brabantio's very public microassault against him.

In his well-known declaration that Othello is "far more fair than black," for example, the Duke leaves ambiguity about how to interpret his meaning, for even as he praises Othello, the logic of his rhetoric makes it so that "acceptance is contingent on overlooking or sidestepping the outer blackness" (Erickson 2002, 139). Similarly, Erickson explains, Desdemona's claim that she saw Othello's "visage in his mind" makes his blackness "an awkward problem" (140). Desdemona speaks these lines when addressing how she would like to respond to Othello's call to Cyprus. To make her case, she explains that her heart belongs to Othello due to his honor, qualities, and personal virtues. But for whatever reason, these qualities do not appear on his literal visage. In this moment, Desdemona subtly invokes the occult practice of physiognomy, which involved "reading" bodily features — particularly the face — in order to discern a person's character (Corredera 2015). Desdemona suggests that Othello's face does not function physiognomically; it does not appropriately communicate his innermost qualities, which is why she had to turn to the "visage in his mind." A discrepancy between character and physical appearance was a common point of contention in physiognomic treatises, with many physiognomic tracts discussing famous philosophers, such as Socrates, whose visages likewise seemed to express their inner selves inadequately. As these arguments go, Socrates responded that physiognomy did work, for his wretched visage communicated who he would be without extreme self-control. With Othello, however, the issue is not how ugly he is; rather, what makes his visage fail him is its blackness, so that Desdemona must turn to his mind to see his true character reflected. Thus, both the Duke's

and Desdemona's seeming moments of praise for Othello depend on a denigration of his blackness, which echoes what Brabantio articulated when confronting Othello at the Saggitary.[8] These are, then, insults passed off as compliments, microinsults reflecting biases similar to yet less obvious than those embedded in Brabantio's more blatant racist claims.

If read in this way, these moments help disrupt interpretations of *Othello* that reify the inevitable ascendency of the "savage's" true nature over the noble Moor. Or to use the language of physiognomy, it is not that Othello loses self-control so that the savage "true self" indicated by his black visage ultimately appears. Instead, these microaggressions point to the real, repeated, racial stress imposed upon Othello, stress known to disrupt cognition, create paranoia, and foster anger and aggression. The violation of Othello's well-being through microaggressions does not need to excuse his murderous reaction; however, it provides an additional impetus aside from jealousy, one that accounts for racism by placing the blame on whiteness instead of blackness. In this approach, Othello does not murder Desdemona because he is a black man who innately turns to violence; rather, persistent racist interactions that take both psychological and physiological tolls on him as a black man trigger self-defensive violence. Little argues that "the presence of Othello's self depends (in the play and in criticism) on the success of culture to render invisible itself and its 'racialist ideology.' It depends, finally, on the ability to accuse Othello the man rather than the culture that damns him from the start" (Little 2000, 75). Reading, discussing, and reinterpreting *Othello* through the context of microaggressions makes visible this hidden role of racist culture, for it suggests that the fault does not reside with the savage racial self lurking just under the "noble Moor's" surface; instead, the fault lies, at least in significant part, with a white society that enacts various forms of microaggressions upon Othello, actions that in turn place the one black Other in its midst under constant strain through its conscious and unconscious marginalization of him.

Conclusion

Thus, from highlighting the violent physical and ideological appropriation of black bodies and minds by whiteness to stressing the insidiousness of microaggressions, re-reading *Othello* through the racial dynamics emphasized in *Get Out* reorients how audiences — scholars, educators, students, directors, actors, myriad future adaptors — might perceive race's role in Othello's tragic downfall. With a beautiful, often petite, blonde, young white woman lying suffocated on the bed, it can be difficult to remember that this play is not only Desdemona's tragedy. In fact, the strength of public sympathy for white femininity even shapes responses to *Get Out*, in which Rose's luring of Chris makes her complicit in his abuse. Actress Allison Williams explains that during the film's

promotional tour, people repeatedly tried to justify Rose's actions, and that those justifications were divided along racial lines:

> They'd say "she was hypnotized, right?" And I'm like, no! She's just evil! How hard is that to accept? She's bad! We gave you so many ways to know that she's bad! She has photos of people whose lives she ended behind her! [. . .] And they're still like, "but maybe she's also a victim?" And I'm like, NO! No! And I will say, that is one hundred percent white people who say that to me. (Late Night with Seth Meyers 2017)

Audiences' potential desire to sympathize with Rose and wish for her to meet a fate different from her family's inheres in the film itself, for Chris begins strangling her but as Kinitra Brooks observes, "he is unable to put an end to his white temptress" (Brooks 2017).[9] If Chris somewhat pardons Rose, then audiences may want to as well. And if white audiences strive to excuse Rose's behavior despite her participation in the Armitage's house of horrors, then one can see why Desdemona's plight would be even more affecting. *Get Out*'s reception thus reveals the challenges inherent in any narrative undertaking a visceral exploration of white supremacy.

Yet the film's overwhelming financial and critical success, as well as its indelible contributions to current discussion of race, indicates that just as people can recognize Chris's tragedy, they may also be able to identify Othello's. The struggle, however, is to position the tragedy as something other than Othello's "savage" fall from white grace. Through its representation of the coagula, *Get Out* provides an alternative narrative that can be incorporated into interpretations of Othello, both the protagonist and the play. This re-mediated narrative opens up the possibility for those in charge of wide-reaching spaces like the classroom, the stage, or televisual media to deploy *Othello* as a tool for ethical racial representation. For, re-mediated through the racial dynamics highlighted by *Get Out*, *Othello*'s racial tragedy is the annihilation of black selfhood at the hands of a white society that destroys black subjectivity, both knowingly and unknowingly. This reading prompts white individuals to question their complicity in similar systems, while black individuals can see their struggles against domination and appropriation recognized by the authorizing force of Shakespeare. This attention to Othello's personal tragedy does not take away from the dreadfulness of Desdemona's murder. She is not Rose Armitage, after all. But it does raise one's awareness of the cost of white supremacy for and its effects upon Othello. Responsibility can thereby land not just on Othello and perhaps Iago, but more broadly on the culture that produces the very conditions that allow Iago to successfully foster the racialized thinking and attendant paranoia that eventually overtake Othello.

This discussion of *Othello* reconsidered via the coagula, that is to say, through the trappings of horror films themselves re-mediated in order to comment on race, raises the question: even if one were to re-mediate *Othello* through the framing of the coagula, what would that mean for the process of adaptation? This leads one to another of *Get Out*'s central concepts: the sunken place. When Chris falls into the sunken place, one sees him floating in a black space, as if having an out-of-body experience, staring up at a square the shape of a television screen, looking at the white face hypnotizing him. According to Peele, the sunken place represents "the system that silences the voice of women, minorities, and of other people" (Ramos 2018), as well as "the lack of representation of black people in film, in genre" (Sharf 2017). How might *Othello* suffer from the sunken place, from systems of silencing and limited representation? More pointedly, how has the dominance of white producers, directors, and audiences that influence and craft the play's representation on stage and film, as well as the white-dominated professoriate who does not "speak" for Othello, as Ian Smith so movingly argues (Smith 2016, 107-109), limited how we interpret and in turn depict race's role in the play? Peele created a transformative work of art because as a black director and screenwriter, he "[asked] a white person to see the world through the eyes of a black person for an hour and a half" (Zinoman 2017). Who are the forces creating *Othello*, and are these forces perceiving the play through "the eyes of a black person," through Othello's eyes? The framework provided by *Get Out* demonstrates the power of a very similar story understood through a very different racial point of view.[10] *Get Out* thus suggests that if we continue to teach, adapt, and perform *Othello*, it too would benefit from a different racial point of view, one that privileges and centers blackness. The metaphor of the sunken place stresses point of view by symbolizing the dominance of a whiteness that marginalizes and caricatures the racial Other. Reimagining *Othello* in terms that resist silencing and misrepresentation therefore means using the classroom to center the voices of scholars of color and students of color who may perceive *Othello* differently, and perhaps in turn create adaptors that, like Peele, can re-mediate the play's racial dynamics by creating radically re-interpreted versions of *Othello* just as *Get Out* re-mediates the horror genre. As we continue to consider not just *Othello* but also the ways that Shakespeare can more broadly speak to issues of race and social justice, it behooves us to evaluate the frames used to both discuss and represent this well-known race play, and to ponder how we can dislodge *Othello* from the sunken place in which it has resided for so long.

Notes

1. I extend heartfelt thanks to the colleagues at SAA that informed this paper, and to editors Nora Williams and Sally Barnden. I also appreciate the incisive feedback provided by L. Monique

Pittman and Karl Bailey — colleagues who always make my work better — as well as the support of student assistants Alexi Decker and Alyssa Henriquez. Thanks also to Gabriel Montes for his dialogues with me about the film. And finally, I am grateful for every single student who encouraged me to see *Get Out*, knowing I would have something to say despite my horror-movie fears. This one is for you.

2. Due to its being a black film "in which killing white people is gloriously cathartic," Peele did not believe *Get Out* would be produced (Anthony).

3. The other two plays are *The Merchant of Venice* and *Taming of the Shrew*.

4. Scholar Sydnee Wagner observes how "[Chris] proceeds to choke her — an image that bears a striking resemblance to Othello's murder of Desdemona" (Wagner 2017), while Aisha Harris similarly explains that in choking Rose, Chris "[conjures] up images of Othello strangling Desdemona" (Harris 2017); Princess Weekes notes, "If you don't think that scene from *Get Out* with Chris choking Rose is a reference to *Othello* then you need to look closer" (Princess 2017); Ina Diane Archer comments on the similarities between Chris and Othello, the latter "who is plainly referenced by Peele" (Archer 2017); and Marvin C. Pittman declares, "*Get Out* showed me Othello strangling Desdemona, and had me cheer for Othello" (Pittman 2017).

5. In many conversations about *Get Out*, the term *sunken place* has come to represent what I am treating in this paper separately as the coagula and the sunken place. In other words, *sunken place* is often used to explore all forms of marginalization explored in the film. I have separated the terms for clarity and precision.

6. One can make these cross-historical connections while still while still keeping an eye toward "distinct ideas of race" (Erickson and Hall 2016, 6) such as, for example, the way race and religion function as significant contexts for *Othello* while that intersection does not appear in *Get Out*.

7. Britton, for instance, argues that "The play seems to shift from racial to misogynist discourse in the gradual undoing of Othello" (135), and Arthur Little Jr. observes, "Othello is finally driven not only by his thievery but by his misogyny as he gives into those suspicions that a woman once raped, once stolen, will be eager to be again so violated" (88, 89).

8. For a discussion of race and early modern physiognomy, see Vanessa Corredera, "Complex Complexions: The Facial Signification of the Black Other in *Lust's Dominion*" in *Shakespeare and the Power of the Face*.

9. This raises the question for Brooks, "Why not?" She argues that Peele's editorial decisions "show that white women are still valued as fragile and occupy a unique cultural privilege . . . even in the blackest horror film of this decade." A less critical reading might be that Peele attempts

to avoid having Chris fall into the stereotype of the black buck that threatens white female masculinity, a stereotype the film in fact references, according to John Jennings, when Chris kills Dean Armitage by skewering him with a stuffed and mounted buck's head. For more on the black buck stereotype and Othello, see Vanessa Corredera, "Far More Black than Black: Stereotypes, Black Masculinity, and Americanization in Tim Blake Nelson's *O*." *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 45.3 (2017): n.p.

10. Keith Hamilton Cobb's play *American Moor* provides an exceptional example of a production that *insists* on a different perspective for *Othello*, the play and the character, in ways that also interrogate how the expectations of white supremacy shape the daily life of American black men, as well as the expectations of American regional theater.

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