Michelle Chen Shakespeare’s Global Afterlives

11/7/17 Close Reading Race: A Case Study

Speak of Me As I Am: The Roles of Geography and Cultural Habits in Determining Race in *Othello*

In *Othello,* race-thinking becomes inseparable from self-perception as Iago manipulates

Othello into thinking and behaving in accordance to race-thinking surrounding geography and

cultural habits. Othello’s downfall comes from his relentless exposure to his society’s existing

doubts about him due to race-thinking perpetuated by the culture he lives in, and his eventual

internalization of these ideas because of Iago directly leads to his physical and mental

destruction. The unspoken definitions of race by Venetian society are magnified throughout the

play by Iago’s manipulation of Othello so drastically that they even contradict Othello’s noble

aspects and convince Othello of the same idea, that he is permanently unsuited to certain norms

of geographic and behaviorally-defined culture as delineated in the play. Above anything else,

Othello’s shifting beliefs in his own qualities determine them, and therefore his race. As

Othello’s behavior changes because of Iago to more closely mirror societal prejudice against

stereotypes of geography and behavior behind his physical appearance, Othello reverts to using

these cultural beliefs to completely define himself. Othello’s wife Desdemona fails to recognize

him just as much as if his physical appearance had changed because Othello has been

manipulated into unpredictable moods that fit assumptions about the geographic race behind the

term *Moor*. Later, Othello’s initially eloquent speech, in accordance with stereotypes about his

cultural habits, devolves into fits of epilepsy and warped, simplified, and repetitive speech.

As Iago continues to warp his thinking, Othello’s very habits and geography change as he more

fully believes in himself as an incorrigible outsider, culminating in the final scene where he kills

himself as he would a Turk, though he himself had previously led Venetians in a war against

them. Overall, race-thinking in *Othello* is defined by how Othello thinks about himself under

pressure from geographic and habitual stereotypes and how he acts accordingly. As a result,

Othello’s race changes over the course of the play.

A major factor behind Othello’s changing race is geographical assumptions behind

Shakespearean race, and one of the most apparent instances of this is the usage of the

term “Moor,” a term that frequently describes Othello in the text and which Kim Hall describes

in the Introduction to the Bedford edition of *Othello* as “an extremely malleable term used to

mark geographic and religious differences.” Thus, a large part of what Iago focuses on in his

race-thinking assumptions is due to geographical differences marking Moors as those of a

different race. When Iago first states his hatred of Othello, he describes him as a Moor and states

that “These Moors are changeable in their wills,” (1.3.339) an assumption that because of

Moors’ differing geography, their behavior in sexual relationships is unstable and unpredictable.

Later, in the process of manipulating Othello, Iago states that “The Moor already changes with

my poison. Dangerous conceits are in their natures poisons, which at the first are scarce found to

distaste, but with a little act upon the blood burn like the mines of sulfur” (3.3.342-346). Because

of societal beliefs about Moors, a term steeped in geography, being changeable and easily

influenced in their fidelity and moods, Iago manipulates Othello to precisely these stereotypes

about Moors. A diverse geographic background is very much ingrained in Othello, as he has an

extensive “travels’ history, wherein of antres vast and deserts idle” (1.3.141-142) that astonishes

and charms his wife Desdemona to the extent that she overturns social convention and marries

him. However, Iago influences Othello to appear moody, violent, and easily deceived in

accordance with beliefs about his geographic background, and this is emphasized by

Desdemona’s confusion at her husband’s changed behavior from the calm and collected husband

she knew. “My lord is not my lord; nor should I know him, were he in favor as in humor altered”

(3.4.121), Desdemona says regarding Othello’s drastically different behavior. This shows that

due to Othello’s changed behavior, Desdemona does not recognize him at all, just as much as if

Othello’s physical appearance were changed. Othello’s race has fully changed from noble

Venetian to someone of foreign geography as Iago causes his behavior to adhere to geographic,

“Moorish” race-thinking. Geography defines race-thinking as Othello’s status as a Moor,

commonly associated as a geographic “other,” overwhelms his natural personality, and both him

and his behavior becomes unrecognizable from the stereotypes garnered by geographic race-

thinking. As Othello’s behavior conforms to geographic beliefs about race, it is shown to define

him as completely as his appearance, and as a result his race undergoes a complete change.

Another factor in Othello’s racial transformation is racial beliefs about his cultural habits,

especially those surrounding speech. Othello is introduced in the play as an especially eloquent

speaker who attracts respect and power, even convincing the Venetian council that his marriage

with Desdemona is just through his talent with words. However, Iago plots to instill suspicion in

Othello about Desdemona’s fidelity, and at the point where Othello has the most trust in Iago,

describing him as a “fellow of exceeding honesty” (3.3.275) after Iago manipulates Othello’s

idea of Othello’s position in Venetian society, Othello states that “for I am black and have not

those soft parts of conversation that chamberers have” (3.3.280-283), demonstrating that his self-

judgment about his own cultural traits has been extraordinarily warped by Iago’s continued

emphasis of race being defined by cultural speech habits. Chamberers are described as drawing-

room gallants in the Bedford *Othello*, and the makeup of the term suggests racial exclusivity

based on habits and behavior. Iago’s hatred for Othello and Othello’s marriage reveals itself in

his steady undermining of Othello’s confidence in his speech skills by instilling doubts about his

marriage’s intactness, driving him into fits of epilepsy and constant speech repetition. As a

result, Othello ends up conforming to stereotypes of behaviorally-based race-thinking and his

race becomes foreign and unintelligible. At the pinnacles of Iago’s influence on Othello’s

behavior, Othello devolves into brutishly repeating simple statements such as “handkerchief” and

“lie with her” (4.1.35-41) and falls into crazed fits. Othello’s lack of control over deciding and

controlling his own race, which is based in his speech habits, shows Iago’s true power as he

expertly forces Othello’s race to change by changing Othello’s behavior. Even though Othello

previously had such a talent with words that he convinced the Duke and the Venetian council

about the righteousness of his marriage with Desdemona, right after Iago manipulates him into

condemning Desdemona for adultery Othello believes that he is marked by a lack of

conversational skill. This belief eventually becomes reality when Othello’s behavior is

manipulated to reflect speech stereotypes inherent in societal race-thinking, which Iago initially

inflicts upon Othello’s self-perception. As a result of race-thinking being strongly based in

cultural and speech habits, Othello’s race thoroughly changes as he conforms to stereotypes of

being of a separate race, defined as being simple-minded and unintelligible in speech.

Just as Othello’s race changes because of his shifting speech behavior as well as his

increasingly violent and moody actions based on geographical stereotypes around “the Moor,” he

also undergoes a transformation into an uncivilized Turk. The term “Turk” was largely defined

by geography, and throughout the play Venice engages in a military conflict against Turks, On

many occasions, Othello has led military operations against the Turks and has killed many Turks,

yet his identification with a Turk at the ending of the play right before he commits suicide shows

the true extent of Iago’s manipulation. Racial perceptions around Turks are largely based around

geography, as Othello frequently travels to lead campaigns against the Turks, who are never seen

in the play, implying a significant geographic distance behind the idea of a Turk. Stereotypes

about Turks’ behavior are thus based on their most distinct racial trait, distance from the

Venetians, and Iago states “Nay, it is true, or else I am a Turk,” (2.1.116), an assumption about

Turks’ behavior due to their geographical distance, implying that Turks are infidel and dishonest.

Iago influences Othello’s behavior to mirror the infidelity and dishonesty of the Turks, to the

point where Emilia, Iago’s wife, states that Othello “belie [Desdemona], and thou art a devil”

(5.2.137), indicating that his behavior is similar to the stereotypical behavior of geographically-

distant Turks. Othello’s racial transformation culminates when he kills himself in the manner

which he killed Turks in the service of Venice, telling others to remember him by saying

“besides that in Aleppo once, where a malignant and a turbaned Turk beat a Venetian and

traduced the state, I took by th’ throat the circumcised dog, and smote him, thus” (5.2.362-365).

Othello’s final words before he kills himself in the manner which he killed the barbaric Turk of

foreign geography demonstrate his full transformation into a Turk in both his self-perception and

behavior. Othello sees himself as a Turk due to his unforgivable behavior of being dishonest and

betraying his wife, even though he was manipulated by Iago, and so his identity changes from

being a high-status Venetian leader to just another enemy defined as a Turk through geographical

race-thinking, created by societal assumptions about geographical differences. As a result of

geographically-based race-thinking and its assumptions about behavior, Othello is racially

estranged through his actions which mark him as a Turk at the end of the play. Othello begins the

play as the Moor of Venice but ends it as a Turk when he is manipulated into behaving according

to stereotypes about Turks. By slaying himself as he would a Turk, Othello completes his

transformation into a completely different race in both his beliefs about himself and others’

beliefs about his behavior as a defining trait of a geographically-distant race.

As Iago manipulates Othello into perceiving himself and behaving according to societal

stereotypes about his race based in cultural habits and geography, Othello fully shifts throughout

the play from behaviorally-accepted Venetian insider to a behavioral and geographical racial

outsider. According to the geographic and behavioral associations with the term “Moor,” as

Othello is frequently described, he becomes fickle and violent as Iago sows more doubt in him

about his wife, to the point where Desdemona cannot identify Othello, just as much as if it were

Othello’s physical appearance that had completely changed. After Iago plants the idea of

Desdemona’s infidelity in Othello’s mind, Othello’s speech patterns drastically change into

simple, repeated phrases, free verse, and epileptic fits. This primitive speech is in stark contrast

with the eloquent Moor introduced at the beginning whose speech persuaded Desdemona to love

him and the Venetian court to pardon him, and demonstrate an enormous shift in Othello’s

cultural speech habits. Finally, Othello dies as a Turk, thoroughly believing that he has behaved

according to geographic race-thinking about Turks despite Iago’s manipulation. Through

Othello’s dishonesty and diverse geographical background, he has all the qualities that define a

Turk, and he acknowledges this by killing himself as one. Othello speaks of himself as he

believes he is and what society believes he is at the moment of his death: a barbaric Turk with all

the associated behaviors and geography. Iago engineers Othello’s race so that it shifts according

to Shakespearean beliefs about geographic and habitual differences, and the transformation is

both mental and behavioral. Race is constantly in flux in *Othello*, no matter how much Othello

wants to retain his position as the Moor of Venice, because it is defined by the boundaries of

geographical and cultural habits, which are deeply connected to behavioral stereotypes. Because

of this, both Othello’s behavior and mentality conform to assumptions about barbaric Turks and

he truly becomes a Turk racially, speaking of himself as he truly is at his death according to the

defining traits of geography and cultural habits in Shakespearean race-thinking. Iago plants

doubt in Othello’s perception of his own race, and this doubt utterly changes Othello’s behavior

so that to others he is also no longer the same Moor of Venice or even the same race he spoke in

the Venetian court as. Othello’s corrupted beliefs about himself eventually inform his behavior

so much that he speaks the truth of himself according to the geographic and cultural habits

defining race-thinking, because his race has changed in his own eyes and others’.