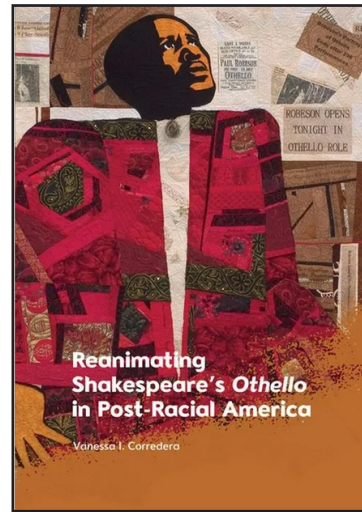


**Vanessa I. Corredera.** *Reanimating Shakespeare's Othello in Post-Racial America*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022. Pp 360. Hardback £85.00. ISBN: 9781474487290. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474487313>.

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Like the dying Hamlet who urges Horatio to 'report me and my cause aright', Othello shares anxiety about his legacy in his final hour, pleading for the Venetians to 'speak of me as I am'.<sup>1</sup> This line serves most appropriately as the epitaph to Vanessa Corredera's groundbreaking study. *Reanimating Shakespeare's Othello in Post-Racial America* delves into two seeming paradoxes in popular and performance cultures. She notes both the proliferation of references to *Othello* and the peculiar erasure of Blackness in adaptations and appropriations of *Othello* in a unique period (2008–16) that coincided with Barack Obama's presidency. Instead of merely speaking of Othello as he is, or 'nothing extenuate',



the first half of the book analyzes the motives of some contemporary American interlocutors who, odd as it may seem, erase Blackness as a main element in the narrative 'in ways that suggest their affinity might be' to Iago or even 'the innocent Desdemona, but not the titular character himself' (3). The second half of the book examines more recuperative and inclusive works. Case studies range from theatre and film to YouTube shorts, comic series, and other creative media, including *Kill Shakespeare*, Keith Hamilton Cobb's *American Moor*, the Q Brothers' *Othello: The Remix*, and such feature films as Jordan Peele's *Get Out*. These works have either not yet been studied in-depth or the existing studies have failed to critique Othello's peculiar absence. By attending to artists' paradoxically racist post-racial claims during the Obama years as well as Othello's marginalized role in these rewritings, Corredera models best practices in ethical engagement with adaptations and in empowering productive interactions with popular culture.

Yet before summarizing the project it is important to note that Corredera's judicious definition and deployment of terminology serves as a model for students

and scholars of Shakespeare and critical race studies. The book first highlights and critiques the fantasy of the post-racial. Due to President Barack Obama's historic elections, both the political left and right asserted, albeit in different ways (10), that the United States had 'overcome racial injustice' and 'entered an era of racial equality'; the promise of course did not 'manifest into reality' (6). With this post-racial rhetoric, a form of 'colorblind racism' emerged (11), carrying with it a 'deep-seated antiblackness' (13). Corredera's book thus aims to expose the 'racecraft undertaken in post-racial America' (17) that replaces biological racism with 'cultural racism' (18).

Corredera categorizes some works as adaptations of *Othello* and others as appropriations or simply as instances of allusions. Following Julie Sanders, Corredera defines as adaptations works that engage with *Othello* in a new genre or mode (4). And, taking a cue from Douglas Lanier, appropriations are works that espouse perspectives different from Shakespeare's, invoking questions of power and ownership (4). A third type of work contains fragmentary references to *Othello* without a 'forthright retelling' of Shakespeare's tragedy. Yet all these works reimagine rather than duplicate *Othello*'s narrative (4), which inspires the keyword in the book title: reanimation. Corredera explains that reanimations of Shakespeare in popular culture have the capacity for 'concomitant identification [with] and resistance to Shakespearean authority', though reanimation can also revive in problematic ways 'the racial representation advanced by *Othello*' (5).

Focusing on *Kill Shakespeare*, chapter one argues that stereotypical depictions of Black masculinity in the comic series contribute to a pathologized and 'colorblind version' of *Othello* (20). Since Blackness serves as a foil for whiteness, visual stereotypes about *Othello* — for instance as a 'visual manifestation of Black male brutality' — become 'controlling images' (34). This stereotype is especially glaring given that the new story is set in a fantasy world that is diametrically opposed to the real world. Turning to *Othello: The Remix*, an 'ad-rap-tation', chapter two demonstrates how the stage work's colourblind approach to comedy within *Othello* produces supposedly colourblind comedic racial stereotyping to 'appeal to conservative white theatregoers' (21). In its appropriation of both hip hop and a purportedly more palatable version of *Othello* the Q Brothers end up reifying white society's misappropriation of hip hop. Corredera proposes colour-conscious casting and playwriting as strategies to counter the so-called colourblind reanimations.

Chapter three continues with the critique of another reanimation of *Othello* that prioritizes white perspectives. NPR's 2014 podcast *Serial* unfortunately foregrounds whiteness, albeit more subtly, by focusing on the covert figure of Iago.

Identifying 'white racial' narrative framing as the culprit, Corredera makes a case for race as a fluid concept both in this specific, contemporary case and in the academy. Building on the case study of *Serial*, this chapter extends the lesson in antiracist work to a meta-critical reflection on scholarly practices. The same white frame in *Serial* has enabled claims about anachronism of studying race in the early modernity. Corredera argues that 'racial history shapes the present's racial imaginary' (21).

The next three chapters report more optimistic cases of 'antiracist post-racial reanimations' that employ 'racial frames that directly contest the antiblack ones' discussed in chapters one through three (22). In Cobb's *American Moor* the actor auditions to play Othello for a white director as parallels emerge between his life experience and that of Othello; and chapter four uses the notion of adaptive re-vision to demonstrate the recuperative and educational value of Cobb's work. Corredera argues that the idea of Shakespeare's authenticity is itself racialized and coded white, which can be deconstructed by adaptation as a genre.

As racism and sexism often follow similar scripts, one cannot discuss race without considering gender. Chapter five then covers three feminist plays that focus on Desdemona: Toni Morrison's *Desdemona*, Paula Vogel's *Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief*, and Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*. In Corredera's assessment, in contrast to the other two plays, Morrison's intersectional approach successfully avoids antiblack biases even as it critiques toxic masculinity. Morrison's elaboration on Desdemona's formative years, especially her transition from an outspoken woman to a silenced wife, decolonizes 'romanticized notions' about patriarchal marriages and 'makes the inexplicable in Shakespeare understandable' (232–3).

Audience expectations are as important as any artistic vision. Chapter six canvases how the Oscar-winning horror film *Get Out* and comedy sketch 'Othello 'Tis My Shite' counter dominant, white, 'universal' storytelling and perspectives. *Get Out* allegorizes and literalizes microaggressions and Black paranoia (288–9) as well as 'modern society's violent appropriation of Black bodies' (278) reminiscent of Othello's service to the Venetian state. Corredera makes a convincing case for reading *Othello* through *Get Out* to recalibrate audience expectations of the insidious place of race in both Shakespeare and the film.

One of the strengths of this book lies in Corredera's frequent and thoughtful comments on her own cultural position and experiences. The epilogue, for instance, touches on the antiracist protests around the world in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. Corredera 'wondered whether *Othello* would be trotted out as the Shakespearean response' to this historic moment only to be sorely

disappointed (304). As much as the book critiques the hypocrisy of the Shakespeare industry in 'eschewing the potential divisiveness of *Othello*' (304), even in the era of #BlackLivesMatter, it also envisions and encourages artistic investment in antiracist work in 'post-post-racial' America (305). Instead of attempting to speak of Othello as he is perceived in the play we should speak out against trans-historical racial tensions so as to reanimate both *Othello* and our collective future.

## Notes

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- 1 William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice*, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare, Second Edition*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor et al. (Oxford, 2005), 5.2.352, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oseo/instance.00013094>.