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Reading Othello in Kentucky

Cover Page Footnote

The spring '07 graduate Shakespeare class at Western Kentucky University was a diverse group of first and second year graduate students, native Kentuckians and transplanted ones, high school teachers and Ph.D bound graduate students. Facilitated by Elizabeth Oakes, they focused on Othello in traditional and experimental ways.

Authors

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Reading *Othello* in Kentucky

Elizabeth Oakes with Heather Adkins, Maggie Brown,
Carrie Carman, Gary Crump, Cle'shea Crain,
Amanda Hayes, Tara Koger, Mike Sobiech,
and Chuck Williamson

In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi gives an account of a clandestine class she taught at her home in Tehran for seven young women. In several novels, among them *Lolita*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Daisy Miller*, *Washington Square*, and *Pride and Prejudice*, novels set far away from Tehran, they found issues relating to their own lives that were too incendiary to handle directly. The “theme of the class,” writes Nafisi, “was the relation between fiction and reality” (6), specifically “how these great works of the imagination could help us in our present trapped situation as women” (19). In effect, Nafisi created a space within a space, the safe walls of her apartment within Tehran. The book is the story of what transpired there, but one can also see it graphically in two photographs which she discusses in the book and which she showed at a presentation she gave recently at Western Kentucky University, where I teach: one is of the young women covered in black except for their faces; the other is of them in their t-shirts and jeans, with their hair (except for one, who retains the black scarf) falling around their faces. Bowling Green is far away from that apartment in Tehran, but what I discuss in the following essay is that what the American culture and media does to my students is what the Iranian government does to hers: erases their individuality, albeit by covering them with prejudice rather than with cloth. What resonates, I believe, about Nafisi’s book, which is a best seller in this country and which has made her a much sought after speaker, is the rebirth of the idea that one can mine literature for life lessons, something the academic world denounced at least by the time of New Criticism. However, perhaps there are certain groups—perhaps it is even all of us—who can benefit from experimenting with such an approach.

It is a truism of the last several decades of critical theory that race, gender, and class are crucial in how we read Shakespeare. What this essay does is add geographical place to the mix. This semester my graduate Shakespeare class is reading *Othello*—in Kentucky. *Othello* is one of Shakespeare’s Others, in the parlance of contemporary criticism, one from whom the dominant group differentiates itself in order to form an identity that is superior. Everyone in the class was appalled at the racism directed against *Othello* and sympathized with him as its victim (even though no one could in any way condone his murder of Desdemona). What if, however, we looked at *Othello* not as a racial Other, as someone whom Iago makes into a “them” as opposed to the Venetian “us,” but as one of us in

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Kentucky, a kind of *mon semblable, mon frere*? Those of us who live in Kentucky, especially those of us who were born here, certainly know what it's like to be considered an Other.

What if we situate ourselves here—and read *here*? This includes me as well. Who am I when I read Shakespeare, I asked myself. I grew up on a farm in rural northern Kentucky, a real farm with cows and chickens. My parents raised tobacco and had a garden, from which my mother canned much of our food. However, when I read, say, *Othello*, am I reading from that perspective or from that of the Ph.D. from Vanderbilt who has taught and read and, by now, traveled, and who goes back to the farm only for the yearly picnic? But even though I think I am reading from the latter, I can be stereotyped as just a grown up version of the little barefoot girl who never left the farm.

I have my stories of being an Other, of having the Kentucky stereotype applied to me when I least expected it. This is just one example: I'm crossing the border from Canada, and the young man at the desk asks me why I was in Canada. When I tell him that it was to attend the Shakespeare Association Conference, he looks surprised. "What do you do with Shakespeare in Kentucky," he asks. "We read him and talk about the plays," I begin with when he interjects: "I didn't know people in Kentucky could read." He, so far as I can tell, is not kidding. At least his laugh is not the kind people have when they are kidding. We can find the same phenomenon in the current blue state/red state binary. Who can forget that map showing the election results in 2004 with the east and west coasts as blue and the rest as red, with the red states repeatedly called the "fly-over" states, with all that connoted?

So, in addition to the traditional ten-page analytical, researched paper on *Othello*, I asked my classes to write a two-page paper on "Reading *Othello* in Kentucky," to read *Othello* in this red state, as hillbillies (although we don't live in the hills at all), to do everything you're not supposed to do in a "regular" paper. The focus was to be on their experience as it related to Othello's. It's common today in Shakespeare criticism to say I, but the I is always the scholarly, academic I, the I sitting in the leather chair in an office full of books—the objective, learned I, the Ph.D., the expert. In contrast, this I would be the one who interacts with the play, who connects emotionally. I had no idea how this would work but took some assurance from the fact that Shakespeare himself was a hick from a town much like the one in which I teach. He was called an "upstart crow" for writing his plays, much as we might be called one for reading them.

Critical Nexus

"Reading *Othello* in Kentucky" relates to several critical methodologies, especially reader-response criticism with its concept of reading communities. It is tweaked somewhat by the stipulation that the students write from a sense of identity with Othello as an Other, that we explore the play from an aspect of ourselves that we have tried to deny or outgrow instead of from the "academic self." The goal was not to interpret the play so much as to effect a resonance of the play and the self. In addition, as the class was writing these essays, we were also following the debate on a Shakespeare listserve about presentism, the new kid on the critical theory block in Shakespeare studies. Believing that new historicism has become calcified and rigidly orthodox, Hugh Grady and Terence

Hawkes, the leading proponents of presentism, argue that we should explore the plays not only as cultural artifacts but also as living documents. After all, what are the plays other than what we can make of them with our twenty-first century sensibility? The present, they argue, is

a factor actively to be sought out, grasped and perhaps, as a result, understood. If an intrusive, shaping awareness of ourselves, alive and active in our own world, defines us, then it deserves our closest attention. . . . A Shakespeare criticism which takes that on board will aim scrupulously to seek out salient aspects of the present as a crucial trigger for its investigations. [One essay in the volume, for instance, explores the allusions to *Henry V* that abounded after 9/11.] Reversing, to some degree, the stratagems of new historicism, it will deliberately begin with the material present and allow that to set its interrogative agenda. It will not only yearn to speak with the dead. It will aim, in the end, to talk to the living. (3-4)

Linda Charnes puts it more succinctly on a Shakespeare listserve. Presentism, she says, “is not a methodology but rather a sensibility, one that always poses the following questions: why should anyone care about this now” (“Presentism”). The pre-eminent goal now, she argues, is to make the “texts we teach and write about relevant to the lives of our students and readers” (“Reading” par. 1).

There is also a kind of relationship to cultural materialism, which began in Britain several decades ago with the goal of instigating societal change through a study of the plays. In fact, presentism, Charnes says, “seems a more urgently re-launched version of cultural materialism, perhaps even more important now in a globalized, post-911 world than it was twenty years ago” (“Reading” para 1). Perhaps the two elements go together, as it was Gandhi, I believe, who first said that we must become the change we want to be in the world. The strategy of the excerpts below is to read locally, while, with Nafisi as inspiration, thinking globally, and to read personally, which is, as the saying goes, inevitably political.

Encountering the Stereotype

I never fail to be surprised at how omnipresent the negative stereotype of Kentucky is and how many lives it has impacted. Several students in the class had encountered it as children when visiting relatives in other states, who were surprised they wore shoes or something like that, an experience that resulted at the most in hurt feelings, perhaps, or a kind of surprise that one was being seen with the overlay of a group rather than as an individual. All were aware of the media image. As Heather Adkins relates, “The south does have a wonderful reputation of genial hospitality and manners that would impress Emily Post herself. Unfortunately, however, that perfect postcard image is most often overshadowed by media images that suggest that we all live in trailer parks and have missing teeth, abhorrent grammar, and beer bottles permanently attached to the hand.” What

this can lead to is a kind of divided self in which we identify somewhat with the oppressor, a kind of Stockholm Syndrome. As Heather continues, “When my town was ravaged by tornadoes last spring, I found myself shamefully relieved that the damage was concentrated in an upscale neighborhood, therefore saving us from the predictable news coverage of storm-destroyed mobile homes.”

Others had encountered prejudice that would have been unthinkable for an African-American, a woman (one not from Kentucky, that is), or, actually, a member of any group except us. This is Amanda Hayes’s story:

The first time I encountered my particular “otherness” was in graduate school. I had traveled to six other countries and lived in Germany for a summer without knowing that I was anything other than an “American.” I thought that being from the United States was my “Otherness” until I began a doctoral program in Near Eastern Studies. I soon learned I was a novelty: I was a Kentuckian.

During an academic advising meeting, the Head of Graduate Studies explained that “coming from where you come from” would make adjusting to both academia and general life in a city difficult. At the time, I lacked the confidence to ask him to clarify his statement. Every meeting thereafter included some derogatory statement about Kentucky. On one occasion, he counseled me in an almost fatherly manner about how he worried that after learning so much I would “not be able to return to the farm.” Whether he meant that statement literally or figuratively, I have no doubt that he was genuinely concerned. I do know, however, that he was aware that I was flying to Paris every month during the first semester of the program, and that I was leaving for Brussels after that particular meeting. My advisor who had once given me an assignment that I researched at the Louvre was convinced that his school was permanently broadening the horizons of a small-town girl from Kentucky. Rather than assessing my situation objectively, he credited himself with helping me overcome my “Otherness.”

One of my professors repeatedly made references to me in class as a Christian. He used me in examples of how not to translate Near Eastern texts, and he made jokes about my encountering blasphemies. I never once discussed my religious background (or lack thereof) with anyone in the department. He assumed I was an evangelical, conservative Christian based solely on my “Otherness.” I did very poorly in his classes, but I had no alternative other than to take them. On my last exam, I memorized his translation of every passage that we covered during the semester. This was no small feat. He gave me a perfect score which saved my grade because he was in shock that I was capable of translating anything.

Although I ultimately left the program, the atmosphere of cultural hubris I encountered gave me an enduring consciousness of my “Otherness.”

Reading *Othello* as a Kentuckian

Ironically, since the play is in his name, we first meet Othello as the Moor; his name is not used until the third scene. Racial epithets abound throughout the play. Forced to defend himself before the Senate against Desdemona's father's charge that he has bewitched his daughter—the only reason Brabantio thinks she would “run” to a Moor's “sooty bosom” (1.3.71)—Othello does so admirably and is sent to Cyprus to defend it from the Turkish threat. All looks well; however, Iago, who has been passed over for a promotion, vows to make Othello believe Desdemona an adulteress. There's the matter of a handkerchief, precious to Othello, which Iago tricks Othello into believing Desdemona has given as a love token to the handsome Cassio. Convinced finally by the villainous Iago that Desdemona could not, as her father previously says, love “such a thing as” Othello (1.3.72), Othello reviles both her and himself: “My name, that was as fresh/As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black/As mine own face” (3.3.402-04). Because Othello's last reaction to Otherness is to embrace the worst projection of it, the tragic murder of Desdemona ensues.

Othello is radically different from young graduate students living in America in the twenty-first century, more so than Nafisi's students and mine. However, Othering (with that capital O) has the same dynamics, no matter how different the victims. Although we see ourselves from the subject position and thus consider ourselves individuals and therefore different from each other, the process of objectifying means that those who make “us” into a “them” see us as objects, as all alike, i.e., different from—and inevitably inferior to—them.

When we brought our experiences of being an Other to bear on *Othello*, we found that some of the most offensive jokes about Kentuckians correlated with Iago's depiction of Othello. After detailing some of the “howlers” involved in applying for citizenship in Kentucky circulating on the internet (you can guess what they are, I'm sure: you must drive a pick-up, have bad teeth, be almost illiterate, be married to your cousin or your dog, be named Billy Bob, Billy Ray, etc.), Mike Sobiech writes,

Othello is like me. I know that we are very different. He's black, and I'm white. He's a general, and I'm a civilian. He's dead, and I'm alive. He's fiction, and I'm real. He's a Moor, and I'm a Kentuckian. We are different people, but we also share things in common. We are both physically stereotyped: Othello has “thick-lips” (1.1.68), and I have yellow/yellow-brown/brown/black teeth. We are both considered capable of bestiality: a farm animal might be my sexual partner, and Othello is “an old black ram [. . .] tugging” Desdemona, a “white ewe” (1.1.90-91). The paternity of our children is suspect; mine might be the result of incest, while Othello's marriage to Desdemona will result in the devil making Brabantio a grandfather (1.1.93). We are both dangerous: I am thought to have guns all over my house, while Othello is capable of murder.

The real tragedy of the play is not that other people thought less of Othello: stupid people are going to think stupid things. The real tragedy is that he cared what they thought. The real tragedy is that he let them—not just Iago, but his culture—

manipulate him. The real tragedy is that he didn't team up with the other Other in the play and in his life, Desdemona. At the end, he kills the one with whom he shares the most. But that's what they want. The only way they can stay in power is by dividing us from each other.

Carrie Carman had much the same to say:

In many societies and circumstances where you read *Othello*, I think Othello isn't really one of the people with whom you would side. But when you are reading *Othello*, who is an "Other," and you yourself have been considered an "Other," you begin to understand why things tend to happen as they do. It is no justification for Othello's behavior in the end, but it would be hard to be told every day what a beast you are and how savagely you behave. You in some ways would have to start believing it.

Such personal identification with a character surely affects the way we interpret a play when we begin to do so in a scholarly way. In fact, that is evident from looking back at the history of Shakespearean criticism. After all, it was only when women began to flood into the Ph.D. programs and the tenured positions in the 1970s that the female characters in the play began to be written about and that the comedies, which center around the women much more so than the tragedies and the histories, became more legitimate subjects of inquiry.

An Outsider Inside

An interesting twist on this assignment was that several students wrote of feeling like an Other in Kentucky, which goes to prove, I suppose, that no group is exempt from excluding others. Maggie Brown, for instance, gives this account of moving from the West Coast to Kentucky when she was ten years old:

My handkerchief was a pair of jellies. (Jellies are weird-looking summer shoes made of a kind of gelatinous plastic that have since, apparently, come back in style.) My mother did give them to me as Othello's mother gave him the handkerchief, but they weren't imbued with magical powers: Mom bought them at Nordstrom's.

My new classmates at Happy Valley Elementary in Glasgow, Kentucky, had never heard of jellies or of Nordstrom's. When I first arrived, class had already been in session for two weeks (they started before September, a concept my West Coast parents couldn't wrap their heads around). In other words, I was wholly unprepared, and no one told me I'd be playing kickball on my first day. As it turns out, a cafeteria-cum-kickball-field is the closest thing I've ever seen to a Cyprus battlefield. When it was my turn to kick, and the red, round ammo headed my way, I assumed my war would soon be over just like Othello's—but instead I had Turks to fight off for years. I kicked back at the ball with gusto, only for my once-prized jellies to fly off my

Oregonian foot and hit the opposing wall with a thud. I lost my shoe as Desdemona lost the handkerchief: by mistake. And just like Iago, the fifth graders at Happy Valley weren't eager to return the trinket once it was in their possession.

I can say to Othello: "I know what you mean, buddy. Being an Other sucks."

An Other Everywhere

In Kentucky there is a division between rural and town, between eastern Kentucky and the rest of the state. Several students found themselves not really belonging anywhere, as Gary Crump relates:

Growing up in a rural area, I eventually noticed that I didn't fit the mold of the typical young Kentuckian. Unlike Othello, my skin color did not mark me as an outsider. Rather my speech, my clothing, and even my hair signified to those "normal" boys and girls that I didn't belong with them. My mother took me to an Apostolic church, and I could never go to dances, wear shorts, go to the movies, or do many other things that the normal American kid would do. However, when it came to being a Kentuckian in my home town, I stood out even more: I always combed my hair neatly, as my Mother insisted that any good Christian boy would do, and I always tried to be good and polite. For all of this, I recall being hit, kicked, choked, taunted, and lied about. Other kids assumed I must be a weirdo, a "queer," or a psychotic religious fanatic because my aspirations were higher than their dreams of losing their virginity at the first opportunity, getting married prematurely, and working for the rest of their lives in a local factory. If that's the lifestyle they desired, that's fine. I never understood, though, why they felt my thoughts and dreams must match their own. Othello's contemporaries saw him for the color of his skin; my peers saw me in the same manner, never looking beyond what they wanted to see and believe.

Othello and I share something although we're very different individuals. We know what it means to feel alone, to be taken advantage of, and to suddenly realize how trivial things are that our peers hold against us. I hope, however, to remain stronger than the "valiant" (1.3.50) Othello, who is called this in relation to his military prowess. Although I fear embarrassment, I never want to harm anyone in the process of rising above that which haunts me every day.

The Others' Other

The image much of the United States has of Kentucky is, sadly, the same as Kentuckians have of those who live in the eastern portion of the state, in the upper reaches of Appalachia. Eastern Kentucky is a drop-dead beautiful place which is, yes, poorer than the national average. However, it is populated by people

with strong family ties and a deep connection to the land. The music and crafts of the region are world famous, and deservedly so. However, I dare say it is not known for its higher education, and those who leave the area for the sunlight, to use Plato's cave analogy, don't fit in when they go back. As Tara Koger explains,

My hometown in eastern Kentucky has felt very much like an island since I moved away. My family there speaks a dead language found only in that area and in old books written by Kentucky authors. They grow enormous gardens and spend all summer weeding, picking, tying, spraying and babying them, then all fall canning, drying and freezing their goods. We grew up with well water and wood heating. I learned to sing by howling to my Boyz II Men cassette with my portable tape player in one of the barn hay lofts. At eighteen, I left eastern Kentucky.

I can only imagine that what Othello went through to get to the position we see him in at the beginning of the play must be similar to what I went through when I arrived at college. When I spoke, my "i's" were long. My first college roommate, who was from Chicago, and my boyfriend, from a city in the south, called my attention to this one night, giggling while mimicking how I said "night" and "right." The letter "i" became a priority on my to-do list, and I worked to learn a short, strong pronunciation of it. However, the list never ended.

The Other's Lover as Disguise

Her experience would change the way she read *Othello*, as she related it to one of the debates about Othello and Desdemona: does he love her for herself, or mainly, even partly, because she, standing by his side, visually solidifies his place in the white Venetian culture (such a debate contains the bias that, of course, the ethnic Other will want to assimilate). In one of the classic essays on the play, Ania Loomba contends that Desdemona is "the guarantee of her husband's upward mobility" and "the gate to white humanity" for Othello (176). Below is Tara's analysis of this syndrome as it applies to her:

On my initial reading of *Othello*, I drew the appropriate and expected conclusions about Othello's otherness: he was flawed, yet sympathetic. It also seemed natural to assume that the characters closest to him functioned as tools that further isolated him or that he was using to try and conceal his Otherness. This, of course, places Desdemona as his connection to the white world, his ticket in. This I never questioned, until I read *Othello* in relation to Kentucky and similarly read myself as the Other.

Like Othello, I have a significant other who does not join me in my Otherness but is rather my key to hiding it. When I am stereotyped as ignorant, uncultured, close-minded, and totally incapable of intellectual development, I have a well-spoken, city-originated, non-Kentuckian, stylish partner to keep

me from being totally pushed back into the crowd of Others. The criticism of *Othello*'s Desdemona, or his ticket out of Otherness, assumes that he has no true investment in the relationship, or that any genuine emotions come second to his primary influence in selection: white inclusion. If this is the case and I am a similar Other, I must assume that the same criticism would label my relationship equally shallow and based on aspirations of social advancement or mobility. Obviously this is not true, or I would not write about it.

So what about Desdemona? We can clearly see in the text that she is his transport into the white Venetian world he has served so long. But is that an evil? Any two partners must recognize and share in each other's world; it is inevitable. My Desdemona has served to obscure some of my Otherness. Through him I have met people that might not otherwise have given me a chance, and I've been versed in subjects and topics that I might not have been so fluent in without him. Similarly, he has been given access to my world. He has visited my family's farm in eastern Kentucky. He has fed the cows and gone shooting with my father, and he's had the great honor of eating blackberry dumplings, homemade jam, chocolate gravy, vegetables from the garden, and deer meat galore.

Sometimes it's just simpler to let our Desdemonas do the work for us. In their world, they have more power than the most articulate Other, and the Other cannot be blamed for sometimes taking the easiest way out.

Othello as Mirror

When we first begin to read Shakespeare, someone once said, it's like looking through a window into another world; then we realize that it's not a window but a mirror. In *Othello* two students saw themselves. Cle'shea Crain writes:

One of the first conclusions I came to after finishing the play was not very scholarly at all. It was simply "I am *Othello*." *Othello* is a black man and a recently converted Muslim from the Barbary Coast. I am a black female from the Bible Belt of the south. For both of us, it just does not get any worse when one is talking about stereotypes.

I am like *Othello* because he is a racial Other. He is an outsider while on the inside of Venetian society. Most times I feel the same way. I am an "honorary white" because I am an English major—a field seemingly belonging solely to white people. Like *Othello*, I have to be careful what I say, or people will dismiss me as ignorant based on my race. Thus, I stumble over my words a lot so that I can be sure to say the right thing and not sound "black," even though I am. On the other hand, when I am at home, I have to remember to stop stumbling for the right words and just say whatever comes to mind, disregarding grammar and politics. I have to remember to say

“Where you at” instead of “Where are you.” I have to infiltrate black society, too.

Othello and I are trying to fit in, but we have to change ourselves—and lose ourselves—to do it.

Chuck Williamson also reflected on the similarity between himself and Othello in “Lectura *Othello* en Kentucky”:

—*Gringo. Leave me 'lone . . .*

But they do not. They circle around him in the dancing dust settling outside this dilapidated Quick Stop. Three white teenagers in cheap sneakers sashay back and forth around this confused and terrorized man, whose grasp of English comprehends the loathing in words like *spic* and *beaner* and *imm-eeee-gration*. He tries to plead with them. *Leave me 'lone*, he says over and over, but the circle closes in.

I watch them and say nothing. I pump my gas. *Only \$12.07*, I say to myself, ignoring the spectacle in front of me. *Must be my lucky day*. I get in my car and drive away. I ignore the charade I have lived all my life. I forget that my father was white, that my mother was Latina, and that I am the pretender who will never learn to pantomime the part of either very well.

Sometimes, I think of Othello.

Attaining the rank and prestige of a white man, he thus sheds his otherness and attempts to redefine the boundaries of his ethnic and cultural identity. Though he is publicly seen as noble and honorable, he is privately viewed as “an erring barbarian” decked out in fancy pantaloons (1.3.358), or one of the many “[b]ondslaves and pagans” (1.2.101) Jacobean audiences would have loathed and feared.

I want to go back to that time. I want to tear them away from that man. I want to say, *Take me instead*. I want to accept parts of myself that I have trouble accepting, and I want others to accept them too. I want to look at myself in the mirror and see more than lies.

In the follow up assignment which involved a reflection on the first paper, Chuck continues:

When my professor requested that I reflect on my analysis of *Othello*, I grew heavy with ambivalence. *Too confessional*, I thought. *The damn thing's too confessional. It's egotistical, shameless, the sort of thing I dare not reflect on*. I tried to force the words, but nothing came out. I had to make a pilgrimage outside the small, academic world I had created. I had to revisit the gas station.

Twilight hit before I arrived at my destination, and the bruise colored skies burned overhead. I ambled into this small, closed-in space as a stranger, picking through the signs that said CLOSED ON SUNDAYS and NO SMOKING. Electricity buzzed within the confines of a gargantuan ice-box, its hulking

frame adjacent to the locked doors. Cold and desolate, the place resembled how I imagined Cyprus looked in the wake of Othello's *hamartia*—a wasteland of dead silence.

Time passed slowly as I waited for something to happen in this gas station. Nothing happened. Instead, my thoughts returned to the emptiness of Cyprus—and the way a theater looks so lonesome when no one stands behind the red curtain. I think to myself, *Who was Othello?* and *Who am I?*

He was. I am. He is. I was. We are. *We are.*

Shakespeare as Therapy

Although I could rarely find a way to incorporate it into my Shakespeare classes, I have often said that, if we can't learn something about ourselves by reading Shakespeare, then there is something wrong somewhere. Incidentally, such was the case in his day. Simon Forman, who attended three plays at the Globe, wrote notes to himself to beware making the same mistakes as some of the characters. Much more recently, there is at least one non-scholarly book on the topic: *Will Power: Using Shakespeare's Insights to Transform Your Life* by George Weinberg and Dianne Rowe. In a chapter on *Othello* titled "Looking for the Poisonous People in Your Life," they advise someone to, for instance, "resist any urge you might have to disparage yourself to the jealous person" when dealing with someone like Iago (143). Googling "Shakespeare as therapy" yielded multiple hits, with some of the first ones having to do with acting. Andrew Sullivan, a columnist for the *Times*, learned from playing Benedict in *Much Ado about Nothing* that "working your way through a character's evolution can . . . become a little digression through your own needs and wants." My graduate Shakespeare class found that to be true in this set of essays in which they were willing to speak so openly about a topic that was painful and shameful to them.

Conclusion

I began this essay with an allusion to a book written in Tehran and then focused on a play written over four hundred years ago in another country. There is no trans-historical experience, the criticism of the last several decades has taught us, and perhaps that is true. However, I return to Azar Nafisi's talk in Bowling Green and contend that whatever brought her here is a counterweight even if we cannot give it a name. She spoke of imaginative empathy, genuine empathy, which creates a space that is universal, a space where we are not judged by nationality, race, gender, class, or any of those markers. "When," she says, "you have been degraded to the point where you doubt your own humanity, then you return, in order to survive, to the highest achievements of humanity, which are those works of literature which give each individual a voice" ("The Republic"). In their essays the class relates Othello's experience to theirs and finds that the two converge and resonate: they speak across the centuries. We all, real or fictional or whatever combination of these self-identity involves, are citizens of "The Republic of the Imagination," as Nafisi titled her lecture here on 23 April 2007 (incidentally, both Shakespeare's and Nabokov's birthdays). My class and I started with the title "Reading *Othello* in Kentucky," but we were also "Reading Kentucky in *Othello*." ☐

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