"Speak Of Me As I Am"
The Deconstruction of Black Male Stereotypes in “O”

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Preface

I am very passionate about social justice reform. I am also very passionate about Shakespeare. For my Senior Individualized Project, my goal was to somehow find a way to combine the two. My affinity for Shakespeare developed well before my time at K college. As a theatre fanatic, I was privileged enough to get to experience Shakespeare in a way that many of my adolescent peers did not, through both performing and watching his works. In doing so, I got a better understanding of the language used in his plays, the inner psyches of the characters and the motivations for their actions, and the deeper themes of the plays in general. Most middle and high schoolers, and even students of higher education, do not get the chance to learn about Shakespeare in the same way that I did, and as a result many students, even literary fanatics, do not develop a fondness for the bard that I have. As a white male playwright from the 1600’s, Shakespeare and his works often get the reputation of being un-relatable and outdated, especially when compared to more modern works that seem to tackle present-day issues more head-on. Because of this, many young students and scholars disregard Shakespeare after they leave their high school classrooms, categorizing his work as something old, dusty, and irrelevant.

This is where the beauty of the modern movie adaptation comes in. By transforming Shakespeare’s characters and plots into more current, familiar settings like a high school campus or the beaches of Miami, directors and screenwriters of modern
Shakespeare adaptations take *Twelfth Night*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *the Taming of the Shrew*, and many more stories, and place them in a context that a younger, modern day audience is more likely to engage with.

Keeping Shakespeare’s stories relevant to today’s culture is not just a matter of preserving history, but also serves to show that the issues in the Bard’s plays, the issues of 17th century Europe, are more applicable to today’s issues than might appear on the surface. This ranges from everything as seemingly trivial as issues of unrequited love, mistaken identity, love triangles and classic miscommunications, to more serious issues of betrayal, misogyny, war, anti-semitism, and racism. The struggles of Shakespeare’s time are not unfamiliar to a modern day reader.

This is where “O”, and my SIP come into play. The 2001 film, directed by Tim Blake Nelson with a screenplay by Brad Kaaya, takes *Othello*, one of Shakespeare’s most controversial and racially-charged tragedies, and sparks a conversation about America’s modern-day racial climate by placing this tragedy in a high school in Charleston, South Carolina in the late 1990’s. The title character, Othello, becomes *Odin*, or *O* for short, a high school basketball star at a prestigious, mostly-white boarding school, who must deal with the consequences of his white teammate, Hugo’s, plot to ruin his life.

Given the current and historic prevalence of systemic racism in our country, I thought there was no better, more relevant story to examine than that of the prospering black man being strategically taken-down by a white man in a position of power, in a system created to benefit white men. The aim of my SIP is to examine the ways in which a modern film confronts the issue of racism present in Shakespeare’s play and transforms
it in order to make it effective for a modern audience. After watching the film a dozen times, I found that I kept getting stuck on the stereotyped way the film portrayed Odin, the main character. Originally I tried to work around this matter, not paying it too much attention in my analysis of the film. Eventually, I discovered that instead of ignoring the stereotypes, I needed to embrace them. I wanted to understand why the movie leaned so heavily into racist stereotypes, while simultaneously trying to send a message against racism and white supremacy, and from this my final SIP thesis was born.

I think my choice of SIP topic is a very fitting final culmination of my work in the English department, as it ties in everything I’ve learned over the past three years, starting with the first class I ever took at K, my first-year seminar Our Shakespeare Ourselves. Not only did the class center around the very issue my SIP addresses, finding modern day connections to Shakespeare’s centuries old work, but it was in that very class that I was first introduced to the film O, the subject of my SIP. In my SIP I took a piece of literature that I first encountered as fresh-face undeclared first year student, and looked at it through the eyes of a senior English major with a wealth of new knowledge, information, and experiences that I have gained through the various courses I have taken in my time at K.

Another obvious course that helped me on my journey to my final SIP was, naturally, Shakespeare, which I took my Sophomore year at K. This course not only deepened my familiarity with Shakespeare’s work but it also helped me to develop skills in reading literary theory of other critics, as I practiced piecing together what exactly their arguments were and also deciding for myself whether or not I shared the same views
with these scholars. This was ultimately a very useful skill when it came to writing my SIP, as a critical part of my research process was sifting through the expansive amounts of theory related to my topic, in order to determine what pieces were actually useful to my own thesis.

Constructing blackness, taught by Dr. Salinas, was another class without which I wouldn’t have been able to construct the SIP that I have today. I utilized many of the theories and articles discussed in this class in my SIP, specifically scholars like Michelle Alexander and her novel *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, which was the main source on which I based my second chapter which deals with the Ronald Reagan’s War on Drugs and its impact on the black community. Constructing blackness also introduced me to Angela Davis’s piece, *Rape, Racism, and the Myth of the Black Rapist* and Crystal N. Feimster’s *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching*. Both Davis’s and Feimster works were essential in my third chapter which explores the portrayal of black male sexuality in *O*, specifically in relationship to the sexuality of the white women. All three of these scholars discuss the ways in which racially biased ideologies and systems of power continue to be perpetrated even when race relations are supposedly improved in the U.S. In my SIP I aimed to apply these theories and concepts to the film, in order to see how these notions have manifested in arts and entertainment. This intense and incredibly important course gave me enough background to allow me to feel confident in tackling the painful, difficult subject matter that my SIP deals with.
During my SIP quarter I took Amelia Katanski’s American Indian Literature and the Law senior seminar. While that class did not deal specifically with issues involving the black community, it did provide me further exposure to critical race theory and the systematic racism still heavily prevalent in the United States. The aim of this course was to look at literature and theory written by indigenous and non-indigenous writers alike, and to be able to connect what we were reading with historical events and legislation that had occurred over the years and continues to occur today. This connection between “fictional” stories and real life government-sanctioned atrocities has a clear connection with the topic of my SIP.

One of the most difficult, but at the same time most important things I learned about writing an analytical research paper is that even though I found some excellent resources, and I had some wonderful ideas and manifested them into writing that I felt confident about, in the end I had to cut out some things that simply just didn’t work within the scope of the final piece. I worked backwards in my SIP writing process, which ended up being a grave mistake. I started by writing down and elaborating ideas as they came into my head and that seemed relatively in-line with the final piece I was working towards, even before I had a conclusive thesis. While I like to think that this resulted in me delving into some good analysis and discussion, it meant that when I ultimately settled on my final thesis (and there were a number of preliminary theses), I had to cut out some significant portions of the work that I had already written. This was not only discouraging in terms of completing my SIP, as I had to watch the pages float away, but it was also a little disheartening to have to omit ideas that I had spent a fair amount of time
rolling around in my head, and that ultimately I was quite fond of. While deleting already-written pages was painful in the moment, in the end I think it was a useful skill for me to develop. For many of the essays I have written in my time at Kalamazoo College, I have been reluctant to rethink and restructure ideas once I have begun writing. While in the moment it felt like the right decision, both in terms of staying true to my instincts and in meeting the deadlines for assignments, looking back on it I am sure that there were times where I would have saved myself a lot of agony and late-nights trying to force an essay that wasn’t quite working, had I just admitted to myself that my original ideas needed revamping and that it was perfectly fine to start from scratch.

In general I think the work I have done for my SIP is strongly representative of the growth I have made as an English major over the past few years. No matter what class I was in, whether it was dealing with British or American literature, short stories or long novels, centuries old texts or contemporary works, I have always been encouraged to look at the words on the page and to dig layers deeper in order to figure out the true significance of whatever I encountered. Even when looking at what initially appeared to be frivolous piece of text (though admittedly these were few and far between), we were always encouraged to examine the greater cultural implications. This is what I strived to do with my SIP. While it was apparent that _O_ dealt with issues of race and racism, I was determined to figure out how exactly the film went about deconstructing these issues. I knew enough from my own background knowledge, and from what I had learned in Constructing Blackness to know that we are far from living in a post-racial society, free from racism and hatred, and that in many ways things really haven’t changed as much as
they should have over the past couple hundred years. I have learned enough over these past almost four years at K college to know that literature, even pieces of fiction, usually hold more truth than fantasy in the end.

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Introduction

We live in a world with many harmful stereotypes. Stereotypes exist about a variety of different populations of people, based on everything from their gender and sexual orientation, to where they live or what their nationality is. Some stereotypes are more innocuous, like associating certain people with liking a particular type of food or a genre of music. Others are more consequential, when assumptions are made surrounding aspects like intelligence or tendencies towards violence. Refusing to acknowledge a stereotype does not mean that it is nonexistent, it simply means that it isn’t being addressed. Confronting stereotypes head-on allows for these harmful assumptions to be dismantled. This is precisely what the movie O attempts to do.

O is a 2001 film written by Brad Kaaya and directed by Tim Blake Nelson. The movie acts as a modern day adaptation of William Shakespeare’s Othello. Othello and O tell the same story, but in two vastly different settings. Othello was written in the early 1600’s by William Shakespeare, and set in Venice, Italy. O, in contrast, is set in the Southern United States, in Charleston, North Carolina, at the turn of the 21st century. Despite the centuries long time gap, the story of Othello manages to be just as relevant in America in the early 2000’s as it was in England in the early 17th century.

Othello tells the story of a black general of the Venetian army, and his eventual downfall at the hands of his amiable inferior, Iago, who out of jealousy and anger, falsely convinces Othello that his wife, Desdemona, has been having an affair with Othello’s own captain and trusted friend, Cassio. By the end of the play, Othello is so distraught
and angered that he, with the help of Iago, devises a plan to kill Desdemona and Cassio. Othello smothers Desdemona, only too find out too late that she was innocent all along. In the end, Othello can’t live with what he has done and stabs himself, taking his own life.

*O* primarily takes place in a private boarding school in Charleston, South Carolina in the late 1990’s. The title character Othello becomes Odin, a popular black senior and the MVP of the school’s basketball team. Iago, in turn, becomes Hugo, one of Odin’s teammates and the son of the basketball coach, Coach Duke. Hugo, after feeling snubbed by Odin and deeply envious of all of his accomplishments, devises a plan to convince Odin that his girlfriend, Desi, has been cheating on him with Odin’s best friend and teammate, Michael Cassio. Like his Shakespearean counterpart, Odin is so tormented by the idea of Desi cheating on him that by the end of the film he, with Hugo’s help, devises a plan to murder both Michael and Desi, and Odin eventually strangles Desi in her dorm room. Eventually Odin, like Othello, discovers that Desi was being framed by Hugo all along and was never unfaithful to Odin. At the end of the film, Odin shoots himself in the chest, just as Othello stabs himself at the end of the play.

In translating Shakespeare’s seventeenth century play into a modern day setting, the creative team had to make some important choices when it came to determining how to transplant Othello, a Venetian war general, into a twenty-first century setting. In doing so, Odin was created with all of the modern-day stereotypes surrounding black men in mind. Odin is a gifted basketball player, who by the end of the film uses cocaine a
number of times, and demonstrates moments of hypersexuality and sexual violence, specifically towards a white woman.

The choice to have Odin, over the course of the movie, fulfill multiple black male stereotypes, while controversial, is also critically important. Odin’s fulfillment of black male stereotypes is not meant to solidify them, but rather to dismantle them. *O* depicts Odin blatantly fulfilling negative black male stereotypes in order to expose the white male power structure that created these stereotypes. As the movie forces the audience to confront these stereotypes, it simultaneously encourages the viewer to see the context of institutionalized racism in which these stereotypes are created and actualized. The film portrays the negative association between Odin and these stereotypes while concurrently showing the various ways in which white men in the film participate in these same stereotyped behaviors without facing the same negative consequences as Odin.
Chapter 1: Odin the Basketball Star

Odin’s initial prominence and success at an otherwise all-white wealthy boarding school is due primarily to one thing, his incredible talent as a basketball player. It becomes clear early on in the film that Odin is renowned throughout the school as the most impressive basketball player on the team, and the film doesn’t shy away from emphasising just how intrinsically Odin’s identity is linked with his prowess as an athlete.

There is something inherently unsettling about the film’s depiction of Odin as this phenomenal basketball player, namely that it fits into the clichéd stereotype about young black men as talented athletes, particularly in the field of basketball. The film acknowledges that basketball is viewed as a sport predominantly populated by black men, because while Odin might be the only black member of his team (as a result of him being the only black boy at the school), the other highly ranked basketball team that plays against Odin’s team, the Bulldogs, is composed of entirely black players. The visual impact of Odin as the only black face in a sea of white students, in contrast to the plethora of black bodies that makeup the Bulldogs’ student section, makes it abundantly clear the way in which African Americans are seen, and ultimately what they are valued for by the white folks in this school.

Odin’s identity as the school’s star athlete is also troubling due to the associations drawn between the appreciation for Odin based on his physical capabilities and the
importance placed on the physical capabilities of a slave on a plantation. Instead of shying away from the topic of slavery, the film leans heavily into a comparison of the modern day boarding school in the film with a Southern plantation in the period of Slavery in America. The film is set in South Carolina, which is declared prominently towards the beginning of the film with a shot of a water tower painted with the words, “Welcome to Charleston.” The choice of Charleston as the setting to the film is not insignificant, as Charleston is city built on slavery, a city from which an estimated 40 percent of African Americans can trace their roots (Stodghill 1). The choice of Charleston as the school’s location not only heightens the racial tensions as they emerge throughout the film, but it also makes it more difficult for the viewer to separate the events of southern slavery with the displays of racism that occur in the film. The nods to slavery in the movie are even further extended through the architecture of the school buildings, almost all of which are large, white, plantation-style structures that house the predominantly white student body, and, of course, Odin.

With these connections already put in place, Odin’s role as the school’s star athlete while simultaneously being the only black student at the school becomes especially troubling. It’s revealed that Odin was brought to the school specifically to play basketball, and during the dean’s interrogation of Odin surrounding Desi’s alleged assault, Odin inquires as to why he was so sought after in the first place, asking the Dean, “How come this school bust its ass to get me here?” to which Coach Duke, in an unsuccessful attempt to be comforting tells Odin, “Because you were worth it.” The idea of the school making an great effort to acquire Odin for the team, especially in
conjunction with the suggestion of a monetary value introduced by the use of the word, “worth” is hauntingly reminiscent of a slave being purchased because he or she is a good, strong worker, and therefore would fetch a higher price at a slave auction. And while it is never said that there was money exchanged in order for Odin to come play basketball for the school, it is fair to assume, based on the language of the school “busting its ass” to get Odin there, that this expensive private boarding school in the South is mostly likely providing Odin his swanky education and boarding free of charge.

While Odin is only a high school basketball player, its suggested a number of times throughout the film that it is expected he will go on to play college basketball once he graduates as indicated by the number of college scouts who come to Odin’s games in order to see him play. While on the surface this might appear to be a positive opportunity for Odin, a ticket to a lifelong successful basketball career, the true nature of the black college athlete’s experience inspires far less optimism. According to Steven Thrasher in his article *Super Slaves: Breeding and Controlling the Modern Black American Male through Sports*, college athletics are framed to young athletes, especially those of color, as a path to a promising career, yet the career at the end of this path is rarely attained, “Sports often appear to be the most seductive path away from the financial legacy of slavery for young black men with athletic bodies, even though, ironically, the execution of sports can look a lot like slavery. The odds of sports leading to wealth are long, even when used to finance a college education [...] Only about half of black college student athletes even graduate and less than 2 percent of college athletes ever play professionally” (Thrasher 172). Even when an elusive career in professional sports is
obtained, according to Thrasher, the result is further control over the black male body by white men. This starts with the premise of the NFL draft which, as Matt Taibbi describes it has a, “Creepy slave-auction vibe and armies of drooling, fleshpeddling scouts . . . looking for raw gladiatorial muscle whose sweat-drenched faces will be hidden under helmets as coaches drive them to be rapidly ground into hamburger . . . . These are bloodless corporate enterprises using advanced scientific and economic metrics to measure the material worth of human flesh down to the halfpound, the 16th of an inch.” (Taibbi). Looking at O within the context of this culture, the way in which Odin, as the only black player, is repeatedly scouted by college basketball recruiters feels far less like a big break for Odin and more akin to preparation for further exploitation of Odin’s body upon his graduation of high school.

Coach Duke’s relationship to Odin is an unsettling dynamic in and of itself. It is made abundantly clear that the basketball team’s success is tremendously important to Coach Duke and that Odin is a critical component in this success. Some of the language used by the Coach in regards to his team of high schooler’s comes off as excessive and overly aggressive. When in the locker room discussing the strategy for the team’s next game he tells his players, “We’re gonna run them until they drop dead or we drop dead.” This image further emphasises the resemblance between sports and slavery in the film, as it creates a sense of a slave owner working his slaves to the death in order to earn a greater profit. Coach Duke’s relationship with Odin is also troubling as it becomes clear that his appreciation for Odin stems less from his affection for Odin as a person, and more (if not entirely) from his utilization of him as an athlete. When Coach Duke awards
Odin the MVP award in front of the entire school at the assembly, he tells the student body, “I love him like my own son.” While this is a nice sentiment on the part of the coach, the choice to make this proclamation very publicly in the middle of a school basketball assembly is perhaps an odd choice, because it reinforces the idea that Coach Duke’s “love” for Odin exists only within the context of basketball, restricted to their relationship of coach and player. Coach Duke’s declaration of his love for Odin makes its appearance at a moment in the film where Odin’s physical and athletic successes, instrumental to the Coach Duke’s success as a coach, are most heavily celebrated. As Odin’s success as an athlete grows so too grows the Coach’s affection for him.

In this same vein, despite the other stressors and struggles that Odin experiences over the course of the film, Coach Duke’s concern stays primarily on Odin’s basketball success. After Michael gets into a fight with Roger, Hugo takes the opportunity to press his father, the coach, on whether Odin, the star player, would be subject to the same punishment if he were to get into trouble. Hugo asks the coach, “If Odin would have gotten into a fight would you have sat him too?” Coach Duke doesn’t dignify his son’s question with a response and instead tells Hugo, “I’m eating now.” Coach Duke’s non-response is a response in itself. He never says “yes” to Hugo’s question, even though this would have been the fair and impartial answer, suggesting that if it came down to it, Coach Duke would not in fact bench Odin if he were in the same position. This response is put to the test later in the film, after Odin has an outburst at the school’s dunk competition and intentionally lobbs a basketball towards the hoop’s backboard, smashing the already broken glass into smithereens. Instead of trying to discover for himself what
has lead Odin to this sudden, uncharacteristic eruption, the coach is more concerned with how this will affect Odin’s ability to play in the last game of the season. He’s shown pleading with Dean Brable, asking him to allow Odin to play in “One last game.” The Dean, in response, asks the question running through the viewer’s mind when he asks Coach Duke, “For you?” to which the Coach replies, unconvincingly, “For him.”

When it came to constructing Odin’s character, the directors of the film could have gone in a variety of different directions. They could have made him the president of student council or the head of the debate team or even, at the least, a star member of the tennis team or the golf team, something less explicitly stereotyped for black men. Instead, they chose to make Odin the MVP of the basketball team, placing him in the position he is most expected to fill, following the racial stereotypes surrounding black men. While doing this, however, the directing team also makes it a point to show how much time and attention the white men in the film, especially those in positions of power, give to making sure Odin fits into this mold and excels as an athlete, all so they themselves can benefit from his success. And it becomes clear that their efforts are well rewarded, as Coach Duke is shown informing a college basketball recruiter of the fierce competition to enroll Odin, “You’re gonna have to get in line, I’m afraid. Man, every conference in the country has been after this kid, including the ACC, the big 12, pacc-10, big Ten.” Odin is treated like a toy that every college athletic association wants to play with, and is ultimately going to be fought over like an object for his athletic ability.

While there isn’t a lot of emphasis placed on the actual academic sector of the school, there is no doubt that the school is prestigious. Odin was given the opportunity to
attend this distinguished school, presumably for free, on the condition that he use his athletic abilities to come and play basketball. Odin’s own academic pursuits at the school are scarcely represented in the film because it has been made clear, both to Odin and to the audience, that his academic success is neither the reason for him being there nor is it a priority to anyone at the school. The only time that Odin is shown in a scholarly setting, he and Hugo are more focused on discussing Michael and Desi than they are on the Shakespeare lesson being taught in class. When the teacher scolds them for failing to pay attention, she finds a way to bring up their roles on the basketball team, “Perhaps you two should pay attention. That way after you’ve won this nationally televised championship you’ll have something more profound to say.” Even when his academics should be the point of focus, other characters can’t help but associate him solely with his basketball career. To everyone at the school, even the teachers, Odin’s role is as the basketball star and his purpose in the school is to lead the basketball team to a championship victory. In continuously bringing up this point, they are also reminding Odin that playing basketball is all that is expected of him. His education will always come second to his sports career, and therefore there is no point in pretending to care about his performance in class. Odin, realistically, has no other option than to fulfill the expectation of him as a star black athlete because that is the one role that the system around him, the system of the school and of a larger society has deemed he is allowed to find success in. In the same way that slaves in America were used and exploited for their bodies, so too is Odin’s athleticism exploited for his in a school of all white students and faculty. His role is to lead the basketball team to victory so that Coach Duke, and the
school at large, can also claim a victory, even if it destroys Odin in the process. This is representative of a larger issue, according to Thrasher, "The NCAA collegiate sports league allows students and fans to watch big, strong black men wrestling on mats and battling on fields, while claiming to educate them. Both allow spectators to watch one of their biggest fears—large black men—in a controlled setting. Both the NCAA and the NFL condition sports fans to see large black men as physically intimidating but also as controllable under the right conditions" (Thrasher 17).
Chapter 2: Odin’s Drug Usage

One of the most disheartening scenes to watch in O is when Odin, succumbing to the stress of Desi’s supposed infidelity, resorts to using cocaine. This scene is particularly painful given the unfounded accusations of drug abuse made against Odin by Dean Brable in the beginning of the film. It is also difficult to watch given the painful relationship that the black community has with drug use in the United States, and the way this relationship is represented in the media. African Americans and Hispanics comprised 56% of all incarcerated people in the US, and yet made up only 32% of the US population in 2015, according to the NAACP. The imprisonment rate of African Americans on drug charges is almost six times that of white citizens, even though reported usage of the main drug in question, marijuana, is about the same for both racial groups (NAACP). In a time and place where slavery has supposedly been illegal for over 150 years, people of color still find themselves in chains at disproportionate rates.

According to Michelle Alexander in The New Jim Crow, much of today’s current racial incarceration problem can be traced back to President Ronald Reagan’s war on drugs in 1971. What was framed as an attempt to keep the streets safe and free from the harm of dangerous drugs (including marijuana, now legal in a number of states), proved to be more of a way for the administration to keep the black community from gaining too much power too fast. As Alexander writes,
The war on drugs proved popular among key white voters, particularly whites who remained resentful of black progress, civil rights enforcement, and affirmative action. Beginning in the 1970’s, researchers found that racial attitudes—not crime rates or likelihood of victimization—are an important determinant of white support for “get tough on crime” and antiwelfare measures. Among whites, those expressing the highest degree of concern about crime are largely unrelated to their likelihood of victimization. Whites, on average, are far more punitive than blacks, despite the fact that blacks are far more likely to be victims of crime. [...] The War on Drugs, cloaked in race-neutral language, offered whites opposed to racial reform a unique opportunity to express their hostility towards blacks and black progress, without being exposed to the charge of racism” (Alexander 53)

According to Alexander, Reagan’s war on drugs was just one event in a long line of systematic oppression aimed to keep white men in power and people of color from achieving success. After it was no longer legal to own blacks and other people of color as slaves, new strategies had to be created to help ensure that the white population would remain in power,

In the early 1990’s, resistance to the emergence of a new system of racialized social control collapsed across the political spectrum. A century earlier, a similar political dynamic had resulted in the birth of Jim Crow. In the 1890’s, Populistics buckled under the political pressure created by the Redeemers, who had successfully appealed to poor and working-class whites by proposing overtly
racist and increasingly absurd Jim Crow laws. Now, a new racial caste system - mass incarceration- was taking hold, as politicians of every stripe competed with each other to win the votes of poor and working class whites, whose economic status was precarious, at best, and who felt threatened by racial reforms (Alexander 55).

The matter of drug usage reoccurs repeatedly throughout *O*, both in the accusation of drug usage against Odin and in the actual depiction of drug abuse by a number of characters, namely Odin and Hugo. Odin, from the beginning of the film, has to repeatedly defend himself against accusations of drug abuse. When he is pulled into the Dean’s office after being accused of assaulting Desi, Dean Brable is quick to bring the topic of drug abuse into the mix when, after Odin defends himself by saying that he never attacked Desi, Dean Brable continues to press him with a different strategy:

Dean Brable: You mean to tell me you’ve never had any run-ins with the police?

Odin: No it means I didn’t force myself on Desi.

Dean Brable: That’s not what I just asked you.

Odin: What are you trying to say?

Dean Brable: You know what I’m saying.
Odin: What? You're saying that I'm not clean? Is that what you're saying?
Because I'm not on that shit no more. Come on coach you know this. I mean test my ass. Test me.

Despite the fact that Dean Brable is clearly trying to accuse Odin of something unrelated to his alleged assault on Desi in this scene, the Dean refuses to outright name what he is accusing Odin of. He never explicitly asks Odin whether or not he has had a history of drug use, instead vaguely veiling the accusation under the label of “run-ins with the police”. Even when Odin tries to get clarification from the Dean as to what he is referring to, given that it is apparent they are no longer talking about Desi, Dean Brable continues to refuse to say his thoughts out loud, telling Odin, “You know what I’m saying.” In the Dean’s mind, the correlation between Odin, as a young black man, and illegal drug usage is so strong that he doesn’t even feel the need to say it out loud, because to him the connection is so apparent. Odin recognizes this too, as he is immediately able to identify the Dean’s assumption that he has been engaging in drug usage, even though Odin knows himself that he is clean.

While Odin is the one who is most routinely accused of using drugs in the film, it is actually Hugo who is the most prolific drug user, as he is seen taking steroids early on in the film. It is heavily implied that Hugo’s steroid use is frequent, as his dealer asks him, “You gonna keep doing this shit all year, yo?” Despite the frequency of Hugo’s drug abuse, however, he is never penalized for it, or even accused of it, in the same way that Odin is. In fact, the audience is given every indication that Hugo is only benefiting from
his steroid usage, bragging about his improved basketball statistics “Three inches on my vertical this month and I took half a second off my 40 bro. It’s doing the job.” Moreover, even from an outsider’s perspective it is believed that Hugo will only prosper from these choices, when the drug dealer himself tells Hugo, “You start playing for North Carolina don’t forget about me. Shoot a n***r some tickets. I’m talking about courtside.” In contrast to the film’s representation of Odin being routinely accused of using drugs even in times of sobriety, the film not only shows Hugo evading any suspicions or accusations for his continued drug use, but also gives every indication that drug use will actually benefit Hugo in the end, as it will increase his chances of playing professional basketball in the future. In a criminal system that claims to be committed to punishing those who engage in illegal drug use, regardless of who they are, both the African American drug dealer and the privileged white boy know that Hugo isn’t at risk of facing serious repercussions for his drug use, and most likely will end up advancing further because of it.

As the film progresses, Odin abandons his sobriety and succumbs to the accusations and expectations of the powerful white men around him by buying and using cocaine from the the same drug dealer who provided steroids to Hugo earlier in the film. Immediately it is evident that there is a strong contrast between Odin’s interaction with the dealer and Hugo’s interaction with the same dealer at the beginning of the film. With Hugo, the dealer didn’t display a large amount of concern over the effect that continued drug use would have. While he warns Hugo about the potential harm, telling him that the steroids he continually injects into his body have a “50/50 chance” of negative side
effects, he doesn’t appear outwardly concerned over the potential social risks of Hugo, a white boy being caught using drugs, as evidenced by his confidence that Hugo will be playing professional basketball someday. With Odin, however, the dealer is less concerned with the medical risks of Odin using cocaine, and more with its reflection on Odin’s changing lifestyle. When Odin asks the dealer if he has brought the cocaine the dealer hesitates to give it to Odin immediately, telling Odin, “This ain’t your style, player.” The dealer, who is also a black man and the only man of color with whom Odin has any significant interaction with in the film, shows a reluctance in giving Odin drugs that he did not demonstrate when selling to Hugo. Even after he finally concedes and gives the illicit drug to Odin, he refuses to accept Odin’s payment, telling him, “Money’s for customers. This here’s a one time thing, right?” The dealer is more reluctant to provide for Odin than he was for Hugo because he knows that the consequences will be much greater for Odin than they will be for Hugo.

Odin is seen using cocaine one more time in the film, but the second time it is provided for him by Hugo. Hugo offers Odin the drug, framing it as a way for Odin to cope with the devastating (ultimately fabricated) news that Desi is cheating on him with Michael. He tells Odin, “This shit right here will help you make it through,” as he presents Odin with lines of cocaine. An emotionally distraught Odin resists at first, telling Hugo, “I don’t want to be doing this,” but eventually concedes and snorts a line of cocaine. What makes this interaction especially poignant is that while Hugo is the one who obtained the illicit drug and is encouraging Odin to use it, Hugo is never actually shown using the drug himself. Even though Hugo is the one responsible for furthering
Odin's drug abuse in this moment, Hugo won't suffer any of the consequences from it; meanwhile both Odin's health and his reputation suffer. The irony of Hugo's framing of the cocaine as something to help Odin, "make it through," while Hugo is the one causing Odin's suffering and distress in the first place is emblematic of a system of white privilege that creates conditions for those not in positions of power that push them into the world of drugs, and then ultimately blames them for their own "choices." This is precisely what happened in the 1980's when a lack of accessible employment opportunities for black men in the inner city led to an increase in selling illicit drugs. According to Michelle Alexander,

The new manufacturing jobs that opened during this time period were generally located in the suburbs. The growing spatial mismatch of jobs had a profound impact on African Americans trapped in ghettos. A study of urban black fathers found that only 28 percent had access to an automobile. The rate fell to 18 percent for those living in ghetto areas. [...] The decline in legitimate employment opportunities among inner-city residents increased incentives to sell drugs—most notably crack cocaine. [...] Joblessness and crack swept inner cities precisely at the moment that a fierce backlash against the Civil Rights Movement was manifesting itself through the War on Drugs. The Reagan administration leaped at the opportunity to publicise crack cocaine in inner city communities in order to build support for its new war. (Alexander 50-51)
While this scene between Hugo and Odin, and their relationship in general, is not a direct parallel of the drive of unemployed black men to the drug market as a result of limited job opportunities, the same principles and issues are present. Hugo, acting on the power he has been granted by a system of white male privilege, creates conditions so unbearable for Odin that he, at Hugo’s encouragement, goes against the values he so adamantly held at the beginning of the film and uses cocaine. Hugo knows that he won’t face any consequences for his part in providing the drugs, and also benefits off of Odin’s drug use, knowing that he will more easily manipulated, and that if Odin’s drug use is discovered it will ruin any reputation or credibility that he once had. Odin fulfills the expectation that others in the film have of him as a drug abusing black man, while Hugo walks away scot-free, even though he was the one responsible for providing the drugs and driving Odin to abuse them.

The huge disparity in the way that Odin and Hugo are associated with and interact with the drugs in the film is highly reflective of the events and the effects of Reagan’s war on drugs on the association of the black population and drug abuse. Just as with the war on drugs, where racial prejudice and a racist political agenda are masked and sold as a desire to keep the streets “safe” from drugs, characters of authority in O, namely but not limited to Dean Brable, are hyperconcentrated on Odin’s assumed drug use and the dangers associated with it. All the while no one bats an eye at Hugo, the white boy who continues to use steroids without shame throughout the film.
Chapter 3: Odin's Sexuality

To say that many of the characters in O are not thrilled about the relationship between Odin and Desi is an understatement. While some of this disdain innocent enough, like Roger’s disliking of Odin due to his own romantic feelings towards Desi, others’ concerns aren’t as frivolous. Throughout the film there is recurring anxiety over whether or not Odin is a threat to Desi, specifically to her sexual innocence. The rape scene between Odin and Desi comes as the climax of this growing tension surrounding expectations of Odin as a sexually violent black man. As the movie progresses and Iago and Roderigo manipulate Odin more and more, Odin moves increasingly closer to fulfilling the stereotypes surrounding his aggressive sexual nature, eventually resulting in him doing the thing he was accused of in the beginning in assaulting Desi. The inclusion of the rape scene, as troubling as it is, is not intended to substantiate stereotypes about the sexually aggressive nature of African American men. Rather, by confronting the stereotype head-on, the film is able to show to the way in which the system of white male privilege, represented in the power-seeking actions of Hugo, invented the stereotype of black men as sexually aggressive, and also created the conditions in which the rape occurred.
In *O*, the heavy emphasis on the rape accusations against Odin is reflective of the lynching of black men falsely accused of raping white women in the civil rights era of America. Just as the lynching of innocent black men was framed as an attempt to keep fragile white women safe, what is framed as a concern over Desi's safety is, in actuality, part of a larger scheme to take away any power that Odin once had within the school hierarchy. The unprompted concern over Desi's safety and her sexual modesty, especially when it concerns her relationship with Odin, is highly reflective of the displayed "concern" for white womanhood in post-civil-war America. Lynchings of countless innocent black men and women were the result of widely perpetuated associations between violence and blackness, as Crystal Feimster describes it, "Presuming the ever-present black urge to rape, the white press portrayed white women as innocent, white men as avenging protectors, and black men and women as violent beasts" (Feimster 181). Despite the popular notion that lynchings were an attempt to keep white women safe, underlying motivation came from the desire to keep the power dynamics of the white south alive, with white men at the top. Angela Davis describes the consequences of a black population trying to prosper,

If black people had simply accepted a status of economic and political inferiority, the mob murders would probably have subsided. But because vast numbers of ex-slaves refused to discard their dreams of progress, more than ten thousand lynchings occurred during the three decades following the war. Whoever challenged the racial hierarchy was marked a potential victim of the mob [...]

Public opinion had been captured and it was taken for granted that lynching was just a response to the barbarous sexual crimes against white womanhood (Davis 191).

According to Davis, the lynchings of black men and women were less about keeping white women safe, and more about white men using the fragility of white women as a scapegoat to keep political and societal power. This is evidenced by the fact that some white women were also lynched in this time period, as a punishment for their lewd and sexually promiscuous behavior. Crystal Feimster writes, "Disorderly' white females alarmed male intellectuals and politicians in the late nineteenth century. Echoing the narrative of black men who remade themselves as freedmen and were suddenly afflicted with the 'disease' of sexual passion, turn-of-the-century white women who asserted new sexual and political identities were reviled both as race traitors and as diseased bodies." (Feimste: 176). White innocence and chastity was not only viewed as something that was threatened by black men, but as something that was threatened by any force that appeared to counter the narrative of the innocent chaste white woman.

O takes on a darker reality presented by post-slavery America with its inclusion of rape accusations against a black man, Odin, of a white woman, Desi. The accusations comes originally from Hugo and Roger, who call Dean Brable after the school dance and tell him the fabricated story that Odin has forced himself on Desi. What is most immediately troubling about this scene is the sheer fact that Hugo and Roderigo felt comfortable using a false sexual assault allegation in order to bring down Odin, knowing
how severe the consequences could have been for Odin had Dean Brable chosen to go to the police. It also indicates that they knew, at least to some degree, that the sexual assault allegation would be believed by the Dean, even though he has no other reason to believe anything negative about Odin’s relationship with Desi. The first interaction that the viewer sees between Odin and Dean Brable is the Dean telling Coach Duke, in front of Odin, that he has witnesses saying that Odin “forced himself on her.” Odin is quick to defend himself, confidently telling both Dean Brable and the Coach, “If Desi says I did anything even close to wrong to her I’ll leave the goddamn school, ok?” After more continued debate between Coach Duke and Dean Brable, Odin states again, “I would never do anything like that, ever.”

Eventually Desi enters the office and is able to set the record straight. When pressed by her father as to whether or not Odin had forced himself on her in anyway, Desi is clear in telling her father that Odin and her have been in a relationship for a while. Instead of feeling relieved at the affirmation that his daughter hasn’t in fact been assaulted, Dean Brable continues to be visibly upset,

Desi: Odin and I have been together now for four months.

Dean Brable: Together? What does that mean ‘together’?

Desi: Dad that’s none of your business

Dean Brable: I asked you a question.

Desi: And I said it’s none of your business
Dean Brable’s reaction to the news of Desi and Odin’s relationship reveals where his anger really lies. He seems almost disappointed at the news that his daughter has not been assaulted but rather has been involved in a loving, consensual relationship with a black boy, and yet Dean Brable cannot come outright and say that he is distressed that his daughter has fallen in love with a black boy. His true racial bias is indicated both in his shock and refusal to believe that his daughter would willingly be involved sexually with a black man, and more alarmingly in his immediate willingness to believe that Odin assaulted Desi, without consulting Desi about the accusation first. Dean Brable jumps at the word of two anonymous boys who call him on the phone, in what could very well be a prank phone call, without actually taking the time to validate the story with Desi before he pulls Odin into his office and outwardly accuses him of rape.

The fabricated accusation against Odin is only the first instance in the film where attention is drawn to Odin’s sexuality. As the movie progresses, the portrayal of Odin’s sexuality transitions from one of innocence and gentleness to that of an aggressive nature. There are stark contrasts between the portrayal of Odin’s sexuality from the beginning to the film up to the rape scene. Towards the beginning of the film, Odin is shown to be far from sexually aggressive. The first explicit moment of sexual tension between Odin and Desi occurs after Odin gives Desi the scarf, when Odin starts to undress himself only to be met with protest by Desi, warning Odin that Emily is in the room. Odin assures Desi that he has no intention of doing anything improper and tells her, “We’re not gonna do anything, I just like feeling your skin next to mine, ok?” In this moment Odin is not only defying Desi’s expectation of what his intentions are, but it also actively goes against...
stereotypes of sexual aggression and boldness surrounding his sexuality as a black male. Odin is content to just lie down next to Desi, intimately, with no agenda of sex.

The motel rape scene, as disturbing and troubling as it is, is nonetheless a critical moment to examine when looking at the effects of systematic racism in a post-slavery America. The effect that Hugo’s psychological abuse of Odin had on the build up to this moment of sexual violence cannot be ignored. At the end of the day, it was Hugo’s lies, his careful deception and manipulation that led to the occurrence of this violent scene. Hugo, who was responsible for the rape accusations against Odin at the beginning of the film, over the course of the film created the circumstances that eventually drove Odin to the point of fulfilling the previously false accusations. From the beginning of the film to the rape scene, as Hugo and Roger manipulate Odin more and more, Odin gets progressively closer to fulfilling the racist expectations of others, culminating finally in the rape scene.

At the beginning of the motel scene, everything appears to be fine. Desi clearly and confidently states that she wants to be intimate with Odin, telling him “I want you to do what you want with me [...] I want you to have me however you want. I want to give myself to you the way you want me Odin. Don’t hold back.” The two of them begin to engage in clearly consensual sex, and all appears to be well. Things take a turn, however, when Odin looks up and sees himself in a mirror. While Odin initially sees his own body reflected in the mirror, the image eventually distorts and instead of watching himself make love to Desi, he sees the image of Michael. Odin’s mind then flashes to a montage of all of the times Odin has seen Desi and Michael interacting one-on-one. It is at this
point that Odin becomes agitated and impassioned, and starts to become aggressive with Desi, who starts pleading for Odin to stop, exclaiming that he is hurting her. While there is no excuse for Odin’s actions in this scene, and, as stated before, he is ultimately the one responsible for his own actions, there is also no denying that the catalyst for his sudden aggressive behavior in this scene is the image of an unfaithful Desi, an image that was placed there, intentionally, by Hugo. Hugo, the one who falsely framed Odin for sexual assaulting Desi in the beginning of the film, knowing that the allegations would be believed due to Odin’s blackness, is the one responsible for psychologically manipulating Odin to the point of making the once false allegations, unfortunately, true. Even after the fact Desi, clearly still somewhat in denial about the whole encounter, reflects on her relationship with Odin and tells Emily, “Maybe he’s not a saint. But he’s never done anything even close to that before. Half the time he doesn’t want to do anything. He just lies naked with me.” The only factor that has changed between the time of Odin just wanting to lie next to Desi, to the time of Odin getting sexually aggressive with her, is the influence of Hugo and Roger.

The choice to include the graphic rape scene between Desi and Odin was not just about adding shock value to the film. The film’s focus on Odin’s sexuality as a black man, and the tension surrounding his relationship with Desi, is representative of a culture that firmly frames a deeply embedded bias towards black men as a hyper concern over the safety of the white female body. Just as the lynchings of innocent black men and women proved to be more about concern over a power structure than a concern over safety, evidenced by the lynchings of white women themselves, the depicted concern over Desi’s
well-being in *O* had nothing to do with Desi and everything to do with Odin’s undoing. The white men who feign concern over Desi’s safety, the once’s who *knowingly* wrongly accuse Odin of assaulting her in the first place, in reality are the ones responsible for creating the climate in which her assault occurred. Hugo and Roger’s responsibility in Desi’s assault will never be known, the blame falls solely on Odin. The same system that falsely accused him in the first place is the same system that led him to his own destruction.
Conclusion

\( O \) is ultimately, a piece of fiction. The characters, the schemes, and the tragic deaths are all fantasy at the end of the day. Yet the story that the movie tells, the story of hatred and the racism and the senseless violence is but all too real. It should be troubling, for the audience watching \( O \), to recognize that it doesn’t seem unrealistic that Odin is dead at the end of the film, while Hugo gets to walk away with his life. The story might be fictional, but the consequences are far too close to reality.

For every 100,000 black adults in the U.S population there were in 2016, there were 1,608 black prisoners, more than five times the imprisonment rate for whites (Gramlich 1). On July 17 In 2014, Eric Garner, an unarmed black man, was held in a chokehold by a New York police officer, screaming out to the officer that he couldn’t breathe, and was eventually killed. On August 28, 1955, Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old black boy from Chicago, visiting his family his Mississippi, was brutally murdered, all because he had the audacity to whistle at a white woman.

\( O \) shows that stereotypes, the snap judgments that are made based on race, gender, sexuality, and other forms of identity, are not harmless. Stereotypes are built and maintained by a system of white privilege that operates by making sure that people of color are seen in a negative light, in order to eliminate them as a threat to a system of
white power. By perpetuating negative stereotypes about black men, and then creating a system in which black men are manipulated into fulfilling these stereotypes, white men assure that they are able to keep their place at the top. This is precisely what Hugo does to Odin, when Odin’s status and success becomes too much for Hugo.

Odin’s proclamation in the final moments of the film brings the smallest bit of light to an otherwise tragic story. Right before Odin takes his own life, he takes the time to confront the ideas that he knows are held by everyone around, and he sets the record straight,

My life is over. That’s it. But while all of y’all are out here living yours, sitting around talking about the n****r that lost it back in high school, you make sure you tell them the truth. You tell them I loved that girl. I did. But I got played. He twisted my head up, he fucked it up. I ain’t no different from none of y’all. My moms ain’t no crackhead. I wasn’t no gangbangster. It wasn’t some hoody drug dealer that tripped me up it was this white prep-school motherfucker standing right there. […] You tell them where I’m from didn’t make me do this.

Odin, in his final moments, finds the courage to say what he previously hadn’t been allowed to say in the system of white privilege that controlled him. He was never ignorant to what others thought of him, and he refuses to appear ignorant to what he knows will be said of him when he is gone. In this moment, when Odin knows that he has nothing left to lose, he makes it a point to do everything in his power to ensure that his death, and his story, won’t be used in the future to perpetuate the same racist ideas that lead to his own tragic downfall. Odin makes it clear to his white, wealthy, privileged
classmates, and to the audience, that it wasn’t his blackness that led him to do what he did. The system of white privilege, manifested in Hugo, ensured that Odin fit the role deemed appropriate for him. Odin was allowed to thrive, for a while at least, as a talented basketball player, so that Coach Duke and other white men could benefit from his abilities. When Odin’s success got too great, however, he needed to be taken down a peg. A life of stress and pressure and manipulation created the perfect atmosphere for Odin to break down, ultimately using cocaine and becoming sexually aggressive with Desi, the two things he was wrongfully accused of doing in the beginning of the film. In a system controlled by white privilege, Odin ends up doing exactly what white men in power accused him of doing at the beginning of the film. The white men in power created the stereotypes, and then made sure they appeared to be fulfilled in the end. O doesn’t sugarcoat the harmful stereotypes surrounding Odin as a black man, and it doesn’t shy away from depicting the devastating consequences that these stereotypes can have. By forcing the viewer to confront the stereotypes promoted by a society controlled by institutionalized racism, the film also encourages the viewer to acknowledge their own relationship with those stereotypes. In order for the film to be effective in dismantling stereotypes, the viewer must be able to recognize the prevalence of the stereotypes to begin with. While O only deals with some of the racial stereotypes specific to the black male identity, the lesson it teaches about the true nature of stereotypes expands past the film itself. Stereotypes are used as a tool by those in power to maintain their power, and it is only in the deconstruction of these ideas that a system of institutionalized racism can also eventually be dismantled.
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