A
n all-reaping fire scythed the tobacco fields in the pre-
dawn morning as Anthony and Mary Johnson battled to
save their summer harvest on the eastern shore of Virginia, in a
country not yet as old as they were.

The Johnsons were natives of Angola, on the southwest
coast of Africa, who had arrived on the first slave ship to the
country that would one day, years in the future, be America.
Jamestown, the first settlement and their landing point, was
founded in 1607. Twelve years later the Johnsons were landed
aboard the White Lion, after the Spanish vessel stealing them to
Mexico was itself captured by a tribe called Englishmen.

After working off their term of servitude, an estimated
fourteen years, like the approximately 50 to 75 percent of early
European immigrants who arrived to the colonies as indentured servants, the Johnsons went on to amass 250 prolific acres as free folk. Their two adult sons owned and cultivated six hundred more on the adjoining lands. The damage to the farm that morning was catastrophic, laying waste to all they had toiled for in America.

In light of such hardship, something remarkable happened. Their neighbors in Northampton County decreed the Johnsons exempt from taxes for the rest of their lives. An act of God. A human kindness. A simple demonstration of small-town decency and frontier solidarity that would be unthinkable in years to come.¹

As the colony of Virginia morphed slowly into a society built on the backs of African slaves, the treatment of blacks would grow increasingly inhumane, until they were no longer even people anymore in the eyes of the law and their neighbors who wrote it, but property to be bound and held forever.

Colonial records are notoriously scattered, but blacks made up 13 to 40 percent of the colonial population of the southern settlements, and black freemen are estimated to have constituted as much as 13 percent of the black population, living largely like the Johnsons as independent farmers among their English neighbors without legal distinction.² The expectation at the time was that they would assume the customs of their new country, acting and being treated as “black Englishmen.”

Forty years later it would be illegal for them to even live in the colony, after the Virginia Assembly passed a bill in 1691 requiring newly freed persons of color to be removed from the jurisdiction. Their mere presence was too disruptive for the system of race-based slavery being built. After all, a flourishing free
population gave lie to everything that would come to be said about those with darker skin.

A decade after this first discriminatory law banning them from settling in the colony, blacks were stripped of the right to hold public office; black, indigenous, and mixed-race slaves were declared to be property; interracial marriage became a legal offense; any child born to a white woman of a black father was subjected to an indenture of thirty-one years; and all blacks were forbidden to vote—underlining the fact that in the early country, before the racial structures that would define and damn us, there existed no glint of an era when blacks could possess all the rights of English citizenship and social interaction among individual members of the various groups was governed, as one might expect, by natural law.

“Yet I cannot see,” a lawyer named Richard West wrote in the seventeenth century, as the legal distinctions casting Africans out of society were being written, “why one Freeman should be used worse than another merely upon account of his complexion.” For the English, being English, the distinction was in rank. In the New World the answer was simpler: Virginians who aspired to the wealth of the European landed needed labor to work the vast new land, and so committed themselves to slavery and racial tyranny to support it.

In a depopulated colony, where the economy was dependent on labor-intensive cash crops, love of wealth outshone any other concerns. Other self-justifications would come later. In the beginning it was the simple, pressing need for workers. As de Tocqueville would note a hundred years after the fire on the Johnson farm, when slavery was rooted deep, “Generally speaking, men must make great and unceasing efforts before
permanent evils are created . . . but it afterwards nurtured itself, grew without effort, and spread naturally with the society to which it belonged. This calamity is slavery.”

Slavery across the main of Europe had been abolished hundreds of years earlier with the spread of Christianity. In the ancient world the nascent church grew in no small measure by taking the side of the slaves, who were approximately 35 percent of the population and far more numerous than slave owners. In the New World the church mostly sided with the oppressor, a moral reversal apparent to this day.

Although the Spanish were the first to introduce the practice to the Americas, it soon spread across the hemisphere as European powers vied for the wealth of the world. The Portuguese ship São João Bautista, which was attacked by the White Lion, with the people we know as the Johnsons aboard, was one of untold skirmishes between English and Spanish vessels as the two countries fought for primacy in the Atlantic. Harassing one another’s ships was common practice, whether the cargo was sugar or gold. Africans simply happened to be aboard this one on that day.

After plundering the Saint John, the White Lion, along with another ship called the Treasurer, raised sail for Virginia, where she docked at Port Comfort and her human wares were sold to a group of local Dutch merchants in exchange for provisions to see them safely home to Liverpool. The Dutch baptized the Africans, then transported them to Jamestown, where they were sold to a group of Englishmen, who had never before bought or sold a human life. A group of Angolans, aboard a Portuguese
ship headed to a Spanish colony, was captured by Englishmen, sold to the Dutch, and finally transferred to the Americans. It was already a global trade.

It is simple enough to explain the economic reasons that slavery, once started, became common practice, eventually removing 12.5 million people from Africa, killing 1.8 million in the Middle Passage, and landing 10.7 million across the Americas. Of those 10.7 million, 388,000 humans were sold in English North America, which though never the geographic epicenter of slavery was as mean a place as any other.5

After the importation of slaves was abolished in the United States, in 1808, there would be a second, internal slave trade that boomed when cotton exploded in the nineteenth century, tearing apart families and people who had been settled nearly a hundred years. By the time of the Civil War there were nearly four million forced laborers in the United States, and, as if to compensate for the fact that it was never the white-hot center of the trade, slavery in the United States was not one apocalypse but two, each with its own violent reaping.

In light of all this, one sees the comfort it would give someone who lived in a slave-based society to declare Africans a lesser kind of human, to blame them for the problems that would ensue from this crime for hundreds of years, to declare America great, the heritor to Rome, while cultivating blindness to what it had wrought ever after. All became logical defense mechanisms in the way that even the illogical makes sense once you understand what someone is trying to hide.

In America the terrifying, beguiling shadow has always been the darkness between the America that exists and the America that might be.
One clue to this inheritance might be found by asking what would compel an Englishman—which is what those in colonial Virginia still were—to submit to the mortal sin of slavery in the first place. Slavery, after all, had been illegal in England, as it was in the rest of Western Europe, for a thousand years. And even at its height, in the English holdings of Jamaica, Barbados, and the southern colonies of North America, it would never be embraced in the mother country, where it was said that to breathe English air was to be made free. Perhaps it was simply easier to accept that which is kept out of sight. Race and its evils have always been kept psychologically offshore.

England at the time was a place of tenant farmers, with varying degrees of rights, from those who were almost gentry to those bonded to the land for life, living in thatched huts; bustling cities teeming with sewage and disease; and, of course, the full magnificence of Renaissance thought and culture. The reign of Elizabeth brought a period of peace and stability, marked by overseas exploration and burgeoning awareness of the larger world. It was also the time of Shakespeare, who gave English literature its first glimpses of the cosmopolitan world to come. In plays such as *Othello*, staged as Virginia, then a backwater colony, welcomed the *White Lion*, Shakespeare questioned the role race was beginning to play in the world, and he found the world wanting.

In common with all of Shakespeare’s works, there are many ways to read *Othello* and many ways to misread it. How one interprets this play reveals a great deal. At base, *Othello* is about a stranger mistreated, undone by his own psyche and those who claim to
be friends. Othello is both a man of singular accomplishments, respected by the society around him, and a foreign other alone in an untested world that no isolated individual can ever master.

Near the tragedy’s beginning, Brabantio, a Venetian aristocrat and father to a daughter named Desdemona, is outraged upon learning his daughter has married Othello, not because he is a Moor but because she betrayed her father in not seeking his permission before her marriage. Iago, an army officer who reports to Othello, has informed Brabantio of the elopement for reasons of his own. He is accompanied by his coconspirator Roderigo, whose own romantic interest in Desdemona has been spurned. Together they claim that Othello used witchcraft to seduce Desdemona. Although Othello had often been a guest in his home, Brabantio’s mind soon begins to run the racist course Iago intends. This is the true witchcraft only race can perform, to lift an Iago above an Othello.

Called to defend himself before the Duke of Venice against the charge of stealing the nobleman’s daughter, Othello does so by recounting their courtship, testifying that his new wife fell in love with him after hearing his life story. From the details he provides we understand how impressive and resilient is Othello, who has been given charge of leading the Venetian navy: “She loved me for the dangers I passed, / And I loved her that she did pity them.”

Given a choice between Othello—heroic, vulnerable, large and in charge, or as his enemies would have it, an “extravagant stranger”—and Roderigo—highborn but dissolute and vindictive—most honorable women would do the same. “I think this tale would win my daughter, too,” the Duke counsels Brabantio as he adjudicates the case.
When Desdemona’s account of the courtship matches that of her new husband, disproving the charge of seduction, Brabantio withdraws the case and welcomes him: “Come hither Moor. I here give thee with all my heart.”

Iago, however, is just getting started. The crux of his grudge is that Othello passed him over for a promotion, which he clearly does not deserve. Iago is not only vainglorious, insubordinate, and unfit for the rank his pride aspires to; he is a master study in villainy, one of the great lowlifes in all of literature. His character, and the nature of all men like him, can best be summed up in his own declaration: “I am not what I am.” All things false a man may be rest coiled within that line. He manipulates his wife and his friends. He is disloyal and deceives his commander, his lords, his prince, by extension country, not to mention any personal principles of valor or truth, so much that he belittles those who are honest. He is not only rotten; he is proud of his talent for deceit. “I am not what I am.” Racism is his first tool.

In league with the equally jealous Roderigo, Iago sets out, like Lucifer, to avenge his wounded pride. The cut for both men is unbearable. Othello has not only bested them; he is better than they. The audience’s sympathies are immediately with the Moor, in a way that would soon be impossible in the America that was taking shape.

It’s worth pointing out the setting of the play is Italy, not England. Venice, situated on the Mediterranean, was in close communion with the Ottoman Empire and North Africa and, by trade, far Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. It was already cosmopolitan, like Rome before it, in a way that London was only
beginning to catch up to. *Othello*, based on a true story, serves as a harbinger of the world soon to come. 

Roderigo and Iago are scoundrels by nature. Racism is a feature of their scurrility but tangential to its foundational function in their character. They hate the guy for being what they cannot be; because he’s black and a foreigner, they attempt to use that against him. (“I hate the bastard, and he’s black, as opposed to I hate him because he’s black.”) But their seventeenth-century slurs—“extravagant freewheeling stranger,” “lascivious Moor,” “tupping the white ewe”—still resonate with the language of modern racism. In contrast, the honorable characters practice what in the modern world would be called meritocracy. All of this reveals a society in which racialized attitudes were already forming, and just how old these attitudes and libel against the black body are, but it was still not yet a world ruled by race. Whatever else might be said about him, Othello is a free man in a position of honor and is in fact honorable.

Because Venetian society has chosen to judge Othello on his merits and not his skin, Iago’s racial scaremongering falls on largely deaf ears, and he must resort to other forms of trickery. Iago and Roderigo are unworthy on a fair and equal battlefield for what their vanity tells them is their due, damning them to the audience. Their ego is greater than their ability or merit; worse still, they view treachery as a virtue. This is the treachery that would become the law in England’s North American dominions.

Across the Atlantic, whole nations of Iagos were declaring themselves worthy, warping the rules to their own advantage and spreading the poison of race for centuries to come. In the
New World even Iago’s self-knowledge would become a truth to hide from: “I am not what I am.”

In the United States, black actors were long forbidden from playing Othello because the role entailed an interracial kiss. In the United States, the play would be misread as a cautionary tale against interracial marriage. In the United States, blacks could not be portrayed as courageous or worthy. In America, there could be no Othello. American governance would enshrine Iago’s point of view. In the American theater of race, Iago, in all his treachery, is the actual hero.

In modern American life the person most often compared to Othello is the football player O. J. Simpson, a black man accused of killing his white wife. That is what stands out most for a society steeped in racialized thinking. But it misses a major point. Venice was the commanding naval power of the Mediterranean world. Othello was admiral of its fleet. This wasn’t sport. This was war. A better parallel might be to imagine Colin Powell sabotaged by Michael Flynn. Or Donald Trump prevailing over Barack Obama. Race turns the world upside down, has no rules but its own unruly emotions, and calls false things true.

In the United States, it would be three hundred years before a black actor, Paul Robeson, could play Othello in a major production. It would be a generation after that before an American interracial love story would come to the screen, in 1967’s Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner. Both productions were hailed as groundbreaking in their day, but they were only a return to the normal course of human society when it isn’t actively impeded by racism. We imagine we are making progress, but really we have only just caught up to where the racialized world began.
As slavery gained purchase, along with a legal and social framework to support it, the Johnsons quit Virginia, where they were no longer welcome, and moved to Maryland, where they struggled to build again from the beginning. On the institutional level, *Othello* could not have been written in America between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries because the military was segregated for most of that time. It would not be until the twentieth century that blacks would hold highest command. On the legal level, the marriage between Othello and Desdemona would have been prohibited in most states under widespread miscegenation laws until 1967. For most of the country’s history, the couple would never have been allowed their day in court.

On the social level, Brabantio would not have needed his thoughts twisted to harbor ill will toward the Moor. It would have been the case all along, and Brabantio would scarcely have entertained Othello as an honored guest in his home. There would have been no need for Iago to resort to trickery to achieve his ends. The couple would never have met, and if they had, Othello would have been lynched. In America there could be no Othello. As one of Ernest Hemingway’s characters would have it three hundred years later in one of the consequential books of the American canon, “Othello was a nigger.”

This is the perverse course the English in America took when, shorn of civilization, cast into an unknown wilderness, increasingly unwelcomed by the indigenous inhabitants, and intent on getting ahead in what was a most precarious endeavor, someone shook hands with the captain of the *White Lion*. 
There’s no meaning beyond this, unless one believes that, in an absence of social contracts, religion, education, or other improving force, it is human nature to do whatever one can get away with. This is the problem that race solved. It allowed one to maintain a sense of self as an Englishman and not a barbarian, as the actions would imply.

There’s no evidence of any other design on the part of the early Virginians but opportunism. Once set in motion it became the governing law of the new society, functioning apart from the larger concept of democracy in a land that imagined itself both sanctioned by God and heir to the democracies of antiquity. Long after English hegemony ended, and no ethnic group could claim a monopoly on power, it continues to do so under the banner of whiteness.

Outside of race there was, according to the early ideals of democracy, a directional arc to history. If you subscribe to this view, then you also believe that when race entered the American mind, it functioned, as it continues to function, counter to history itself.

The institutions created to wall it off from rational thought, and the burgeoning Enlightenment, arrived in law, in culture, and in custom to the extent that now in the twenty-first century whenever we break away from such customs to claim a universal democracy, it becomes, like the rulings that struck down the so-called miscegenation laws and segregation in public places, cause for liberal celebration.

It should not be. There is nothing progressive about people in the twentieth century marrying whom they wish. Every liberal victory of this type is a partial repentance of colonial structures, an event we are supposed to take joy in, as opposed to the
full restitution of natural rights, masking the fact that after four hundred years of oppression America has yet to extend the full social contract to blacks. This theft of their rights was the flaw in the design of America we have been struggling to right or struggling to resist ever since. What steps we may take toward fixing it are long overdue, not something one gets special credit for or cause for moral vanity, at least not if you begin with the assumption that people truly do have the same abilities, same dignity, and same rights. Viewed from this perspective, we are a hundred years and more behind schedule and have no claims to victory, only work to do.

But the habit of clear-eyed democratic behavior has yet to take root, either in policy or on the psychological, institutional, and social planes that have been warped in service of racial segregation. Like our thinking about race and the social instincts we inherit, each of these planes is warped still. So much so that most times we don’t even recognize the tilt, which serves to seduce us into taking measure by that which is false, not that which is true.