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Behold, Steve Bannon's Hip-Hop Shakespeare Rewrite: 'Coriolanus'

Daniel Pollack-Pelzner

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PORTLAND, Ore. -- Soon after Stephen K. Bannon was appointed chief strategist for President-elect Donald J. Trump, profiles noted that he was a co-author of a rap musical based on Shakespeare's Roman tragedy "Coriolanus." The revelation played as a punch line, another loopy swerve in a career that took Mr. Bannon from a working-class Democratic family to the Trump White House. Coming just after Mr. Trump denounced the hip-hop hit "Hamilton" as "overrated," the news that his right-hand man had scripted a hip-hop statesman himself felt almost comical.

But Mr. Bannon's "Coriolanus," set in Los Angeles during the 1992 riots, is deadly serious. And at a moment when the question "What does Bannon want?" has taken on a new urgency, his adaptation of Shakespeare offers an unexpected clue.

Mr. Bannon's revision of Shakespeare's tragedy draws its title from one of Coriolanus's lines, "The Thing I Am." It suggests the chilling conflict that Mr. Bannon would like to play out on a national stage.

BRUTUS

Dear? We're cheap, not dear.

(to crowd, voice rising)

White folks are dear. Their kibbles
'n' bits would relieve us, but they
call us "dear" and cast us nothing.
Our suffering's their gain. Let's
avenge with guns and knives. I speak
from hunger. Now... let's do it.

The crowd CHEERS!

In this excerpt from the screenplay, a low-level Blood rallies the crowd at a pool hall.

In Shakespeare's play, itself adapted from Plutarch's account of the fledgling Roman republic, a Roman general wins a victory over the Volscians at Corioles, earning himself the nickname Coriolanus. But when political operatives want to turn him into a candidate for election, he refuses to flatter popular taste, and the starving Roman citizens, whipped into an anti-elite frenzy by sinister tribunes, turn against him. Banished from Rome, Coriolanus unites with the Volscians, his former enemies, to war against his homeland. Only his fearsome mother can keep him from sacking Rome, and when he relents, the Volscians murder him.

Political radicals have often used “Coriolanus” to illustrate their ideologies, with diverging results depending on whether their sympathies lay with the leader or with the people.

In the last century, two interpretations held particular force: one that glorifies the Roman general as the heroic strongman his country needs (a view so popular in Hitler’s Third Reich that the American occupation banned the play in Germany after World War II), and another that sees the Roman mob as a necessary corrective to the greedy excesses of the ruling elite (a view common in Soviet-era adaptations).

MARCIUS

I took your prize and had my way; the blood you see that covers me is not my own - it's Crabs'. Crank up your hatred to the skies to be revenged on me.

AUFIDIUS

Nobody could escape me!

A highly stylized and choreographed fight sequence. They go foot-to-foot, then pull out knives. Aufidius flips Coriolanus over his back and they break into an Ultimate Fight Champions meets Hong Kong Swordplay. They fight across the roof with the inflamed city in the background.

A showdown between Marcius (not yet nicknamed Coriolanus) and his nemesis, the Crip commander Aufidius.

Mr. Bannon, whom Andrew Breitbart once hailed as the Leni Riefenstahl of the Tea Party movement, has brazenly combined these two perspectives to fashion the radical populism of the Tea Party in service of Mr. Trump as a national savior. His “Coriolanus” script, written in the late 1990s with Julia Jones, a screenwriter, offers a vision of his Shakespeare-fueled fantasy: a violent macho conflict to purge corrupt leaders and pave the way for a new strongman to emerge.

I got a copy of the script from Ms. Jones, who told me over the phone that Mr. Bannon came up with the ideas while she fleshed out the adaptation, blending Shakespeare’s punchy verse with Los Angeles street talk for the dialogue — though he would often chime in with a particularly aggressive line. His concept turns Shakespeare’s Romans and Volscians into Bloods and Crips, feuding on the South Central streets in the

aftermath of the Rodney King verdict as images of violence and looting loop on TV screens.

The dialogue reads like a parody of gang slang (“I’m an O.G. from the ‘hood come to speak with Coriolanus”), but the battle scenes hurtle along, and a characteristic Bannon theme emerges. Coriolanus, the Bloods’ enforcer, becomes an “in-your-face hammer” who won’t deliver the politically correct messages his handlers want.

Aufidius says nothing but just sits back down, checks another gun’s barrel, then picks up a rod and begins cleaning it. As he talks, the gun transforms: it’s deadly, it’s sexual . . .

AUFIDIUS

Marcus, Marcus... you speak divinely, cuz. Each word unweeds my heart, uproots our ancient envy. Shall I wrap my arms around you hotly as I did in battle? Like with that bitch I married-- (loading gun) -- when we first got it on; now my heart’s dancing rapt as when I lay bestride her threshold. Man, you are seducing me. We been down together many night- times in my dreams. And when I woke...

He pockets the loaded gun, rises, takes a beer, crosses to Coriolanus - and hands it to him.

In a later scene, Aufidius reacts after Coriolanus emerges from disguise to seek an alliance with the Crips.

“I cannot be other than I am,” he says, balking at catering to the news media, represented as “monstrous talking heads chewing the scenery -- as they’re about to chew up Coriolanus.”

Since the Breitbart site, which Mr. Bannon oversaw before joining Mr. Trump, ran headlines like [“L.A. Riots: Thin Veneer of Civilization”](#) and [“Media’s Romance With Rodney King Continues in Death.”](#) it’s surprising to see Mr. Bannon’s screenplay exalt black gang leaders like Coriolanus who battle the police: “A black thing for the little black girl and the homie Rodney King.” And when Mr. Bannon defines the alt-right today as “antiglobalist,” it’s even more bizarre to read his framing device for the screenplay (an opening page that Ms. Jones recalled him handing to her, handwritten in full) that links Coriolanus’s gang to black workers in a South African gold mine. Mr. Bannon describes the miners’ song as a “cacophony of voices chanting from the Serengeti for a

lost homeland" -- an American investment banker's fantasy of primitive African manhood, a dance of "brothers, slaves and manliness in dying."

LIEUTENANT

You think he'll take the city?

INTERCUT - CORIOLANUS ON HARLEY - WITH AUFIDIUS

AUFIDIUS

All yield to him -- the press, whitey,
the color aristo-cracks of his own set.
Only the trash is weak, and I think
he'll view them as birds do fish and
take them as his due. He served the hood,
but lost it.

CLOSE ON - CORIOLANUS, riding hell-bent into the wind.

AUFIDIUS (O.S.)

Whether from bad choice, pride, or the
inability to move from war to peace, it
made him feared and hated by the media.

Aufidius predicts what will happen upon Coriolanus's return to Los Angeles.

Mr. Bannon's thrill at masculine violence still resonates, even as his sympathies have shifted from embattled black communities. In Shakespeare's play, a Roman patrician rebukes the mob as "mutinous members" of the body politic, insulting their leader as "the great toe of this assembly." In Mr. Bannon's rewrite, the patrician, called Mack-Daddy of South Central, walks over to the people's chief, grabs the man's crotch and updates the insult by replacing "toe" with a vulgar word for genitals. Crotch-grabbing isn't just locker-room talk here; it's the currency of power, settled in what the screenplay calls "the classic mano-a-mano fashion."

Ms. Jones, who described her own political views as "left of Bernie Sanders," said that Mr. Bannon was drawn to Shakespeare's Roman plays because of their heroic military violence. Ms. Jones and Mr. Bannon's first collaboration was an adaptation of "Titus Andronicus" set in outer space, which she called "truly terrible," but she hoped that their "Coriolanus" screenplay could still reach theaters.

GANGSTA VOICE (V.O.)
(the reading continues)

To all Crips and Bloods, let's unite and don't
gangbang and let it be a black thing for the
little black girl and the homie Rodney King.
An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. If
LAPD hurt a black, we'll kill two. Pow. Pow.
Pow.

Coriolanus's army issues a message as it approaches the city.

She might not have to wait for a Hollywood producer. As chief strategist to Mr. Trump, Mr. Bannon could see his vision of racial aggression, driven by a hammer-headed hero who doesn't have to pander to the craven media, gain an audience far beyond Shakespeare's Globe.

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Inset excerpts from "The Thing I Am," Stephen K. Bannon and Julia Jones's version of "Coriolanus" set in 1990s Los Angeles.

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