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Othello in Harlem: Transforming Theater in Djanet Sears’s *Harlem Duet*

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Djanet Sears’s *Harlem Duet* reimagines Shakespeare’s *Othello* by weaving together three stories about Othello and his first wife, Billie, across three distinct time periods: the Civil War era, the Harlem Renaissance, and the present day. This essay centers on the scenes set in the Harlem Renaissance, a timeline that appears to unfold out of chronological order. By disrupting the linear progression of time, Sears transforms the theater into a platform that amplifies the stories of the oppressed through the dramatization of the ongoing, persistent cycle of oppression.

But 100 years later the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination ... One hundred years later the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself in exile in his own land. So we’ve come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.

Martin Luther King Jr., March on Washington, 1963¹

I have a dream. A dream that one day in the city where I live, at any given time of the year, I will be able to find at least one play that is filled with people who look like me, telling stories about me, my family, my friends, my community. For most people of European descent, this is a privilege taken for granted.

Djanet Sears, “Notes of a Coloured Girl”²

Djanet Sears’s play *Harlem Duet* opens to the sounds of the cello and the bass wafting through the theater in a melodic “heaving melancholic blues,” as Martin Luther King Jr.’s distinctive, resounding voice laments the “bad check” America has given its African American citizens (Prologue). Despite

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¹ Martin Luther King Jr., “I Have a Dream,” National Archives Online, 1963, at www.archives.gov/files/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf.

² Djanet Sears, *Harlem Duet* (Winnipeg: Scirocco Drama, 1997), hereafter cited in the text.

the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation one hundred years before, he explains, “the Negro still is not free.” His words linger as the stage slowly illuminates two characters named HE and SHE in a tiny dressing room that we will visit three more times before the end of this two-act play. The stage directions explain, “She looks at HE as if searching for something. He has lathered his face and is slowly erasing the day’s stubble with a straight razor. She looks down at the handkerchief.” Then SHE breaks the tension with the play’s first line: “We keep doing this don’t we?” (Prologue).

This opening line to Sears’s reimagining of William Shakespeare’s *Othello* initiates a conversation between the married couple in which SHE learns that HE is leaving her for a white woman named Mona, the director of the theater where HE is a black minstrel. It is 1928 at the height of the Harlem Renaissance, and HE sees an opportunity to divest himself of racial limitations and become a respected actor on a color-blind stage someday. Taking note of the “[l]ittle strawberries” embroidered on the famous handkerchief in her hands, SHE recalls that “[t]here’s magic in the web of it,” and reminds HE of the promises he had made to her when their love began (Prologue). HE feels that SHE anchors him within a painful past shaped by the weight of racial oppression; Mona offers a new start, seemingly untethered to racial restrictions. The stage directions continue: “She holds the handkerchief out to him. He does not take it. She lets it fall at his feet. After a few moments, he picks it up” (Prologue).

Students of Shakespeare’s play will remember that a similar scene unfolds between Desdemona and Othello in Act III, when Othello pushes the object away from his worried wife because her “napkin is too little” (3.3.304) to contain his growing suspicions surrounding her fidelity.³ It is at this moment that we become aware of the handkerchief, that Iago has charged Emilia to “filch it” (3.3.333), and that it will play an important role in the unfolding of Iago’s plot to sabotage Othello’s marriage, status, and life. Its appearance in Harlem, then, conjures the specter of racial otherness originally played out on the early modern stage. Set to the soundtrack of King’s refrain that “the Negro still is not free,” Sears’s opening unmask the cyclical nature of oppression that simply morphs into new iterations of itself over time. As a result, we find that the answer to the question SHE asks at the start of the play – “We keep doing this don’t we?” – is a resounding yes.

In its first breaths, *Harlem Duet* conjures slavery, civil rights, minstrelsy, the Harlem Renaissance, and, with the famous handkerchief in SHE’s hands, Shakespeare’s *Othello*. SHE’s first words, then, are poignant not just because

³ Kim F. Hall, ed., *Othello: Texts and Contexts* (Boston: Bedford and St. Martin’s, 2007), hereafter cited in the text.

they introduce the domestic complications that exist between the couple, but also because they speak to a longer tradition of cyclical oppression, of history repeating itself, of the reality that all these years later “the Negro ... finds himself in exile in his own land.” Sears magnifies the timelessness of this cycle by interweaving the story of three iterations of the same couple – HIM and HER, HE and SHE, and Othello and Billie – with the events of three significant time periods in American history: the Civil War era in 1860, the Harlem Renaissance in 1928, and the ongoing, everyday experiences of injustice for the black community in the present day. Sears’s reinvention of the familiar story of Othello within this anachronistic framework reveals the ongoing accumulation of injustice that defines the past, informs the present, and threatens the future of black citizens.

The prologue frames this dynamic dramatic structure by situating it within the first of four scenes dedicated to the Harlem Renaissance, a timeline itself that offers a disjointed reflection of time and art. While both the Civil War and present-day narratives move chronologically within their respective timelines, the scenes set in 1928 seemingly unfold out of order: following our first encounter with HE and SHE in the prologue, the subsequent scene reveals SHE standing above HE’s “motionless” body clutching his straight-edged razor in her “bloodied palms” (1.8). Next, playgoers witness both a debate between HE and SHE regarding his role as a minstrel actor and SHE ending HE’s life with his own razor (2.6). In the play’s penultimate scene, HE is resurrected: painting his face black and his lips white, he recites lines from the Senate scene in Shakespeare’s *Othello* (2.9). Set in “a tiny dressing room” within an era known for its artistic innovation, Sears initiates a meta-commentary about how black narratives unfold on stage (2.6). By reinventing how time functions in this iteration of Othello’s life, she assumes a creative agency that decenters Shakespeare’s vision and transforms the theater into a platform for voices like hers.

The Harlem Renaissance – or, as James Weldon Johnson famously described it, “the flowering of Negro literature”⁴ – constituted a movement by black artists to create an artistic canon meant to represent black history and express black experience on their own terms. Seeking to unseat predominant narratives produced by white authors for white audiences – such as the minstrel shows that caricatured the physical appearances and gestures of black bodies – artists of the Harlem Renaissance used their platforms to reflect upon the past and to shape a new version of the self. These

⁴ David Krasner, “Negro Drama and the Harlem Renaissance,” in George Hutchinson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 57–70, 57.

transformations, though generative and inspiring, also led to ideological conflicts between major players of the movement who wondered whether art should protest racism or should reflect the ordinary lives of the black community, constituting what Johnson described in 1928 as the “double audience.”⁵

SHE and HE rehearse this debate in Act II, scene vi, where HE explains his attachment to his career as a minstrel actor. Because of the color of his skin, HE has traditionally been passed over for roles reserved for white actors. HE explains in this scene that he considers himself to be “of Ira Aldridge stock” (2.6), thereby linking himself to the first black actor to gain international fame in Shakespearean roles, including both Othello and nonblack characters like Macbeth and Hamlet – the exact title characters HE aspires to portray. Now that Mona – the director who has recently cast HE as Pericles – “sees [his] gift” (2.6), HE is becoming more hopeful about following Aldridge’s path and playing a variety of roles, regardless of skin color; his participation in the minstrel theater, he believes, is a necessary step toward his dream.

While Aldridge broke past the limitations of the theater by virtue of his talent, his legacy centers on his subversion of theatrical expectations rather than a willingness to assimilate to them. HE’s idea of Aldridge as a “classical man” (2.6) imagines the figure as surpassing the boundaries of racial identification – a feat HE hopes to accomplish, too. The truth is, however, that Aldridge achieved notoriety both because he performed black characters without doing so in blackface and because he performed in whiteface when cast as nonblack characters.⁶ Aldridge, therefore, utilized the space of the theater – an institution built upon commodifying and objectifying black bodies for its own gains – as a means of transforming what it meant to be black (and to perform blackness) onstage.

Unable to see the transformative power of the theater, HE finds himself returning to a familiar scene. Act II, scene vi begins in nearly the same way the prologue ends: the stage directions transport us back to the “tiny dressing room” and draw our focus to “a shaving brush, a straight-edged razor, grease-paint and a top hat” on a countertop. We observe as “SHE holds the handkerchief out to him. HE does not take it. SHE lets it fall at his feet. After a few moments, HE picks it up” (2.6). Surrounded by objects that point to his acquired identity as a black minstrel, HE also circles back – quite literally – to the same moment in Act III of *Othello* when the handkerchief first falls to

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Bernth Lindfors, *Ira Aldridge: The Early Years, 1807–1833* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2011), 170.

the ground, replaying the allusion performed in the prologue. As he gazes at the object in his hands, he laments the racial restrictions that bind him:

White, red, black, green, indigo ... What difference does it make? That makes no sense ... makes no difference “If virtue no delighted beauty lack, Your son-in-law is far more fair than black.” Far more fair than black. I want ... I need to do this ... For my soul. I am an actor. I – (2.6)

Fluent in the words of *Othello*, he cites the Duke’s advice to Brabantio in Act I to look past Othello’s skin color: “White, red, black, green, indigo”; these are simply empty signifiers we fill with meaning. But just as HE refuses to acknowledge the complexity of Aldridge’s legacy, he also overlooks two significant meanings embedded within the Duke’s seemingly generous advice. As Robert Hornback has argued, blackness in the early modern period was associated with “folly, madness, and an absence of that divine gift, the ‘light’ of reason,” ultimately justifying violent actions against black bodies.⁷ The Duke’s suggestion that Othello is “[f]ar more fair than black” (1.3.292), therefore, illuminates an imagined duality between two terms that are seemingly at odds: fair – as a parallel to “virtue” (1.3.291) in the previous line – cannot be reconciled with black – which is not only syntactically parallel to “lack” (1.3.291), but also answers its rhyme. Motivated by this assumption, the Duke suggests that perhaps Othello’s blackness is a deficiency Brabantio might be willing to overlook based on Othello’s artistry with language – a power that is likened to sorcery when Othello wields it in his speech to the Senate.

Though in “a tiny dressing room” surrounded by greasepaint and a top hat – accoutrements of a black minstrel – HE also overlooks the significance of the Duke’s words within the context of *performing* blackness. Even as the Duke perpetuates the discriminatory notion that blackness signifies “lack,” he delivers lines that are intended to describe a character played by a white actor in blackface. The Duke’s description of Othello, therefore, reminds the audience that, indeed, the actor onstage is literally “far more fair than black,” and as such, is capable of removing blackness – and all of its acquired meanings – by simply washing it away.⁸ HE’s claim that the arbitrary meaning assigned to language “makes no sense ... makes no difference” is, therefore, contradicted through his own recitation of the Duke’s lines – words that

⁷ Robert Hornback, “The Folly of Racism: Enslaving Blackface and the ‘Natural’ Fool Tradition,” *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England*, 20 (2007), 46–84, 49.

⁸ For discussions of how blackness was performed on the early modern stage see Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Performing Blackness on English Stages, 1500–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Ian Smith, “The Textile Black Body: Race and ‘Shadowed Livery’ in *The Merchant of Venice*,” in Valerie Traub, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Embodiment: Gender, Sexuality and Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 170–85.

are not meant for him or people who look like him, words that betray the fantasy of sanitizing blackness, words that undermine his selfhood.

HE rehearses language that perpetuates a long-standing denigration of blackness, from over-the-top blackface performances to an era of the color-blind stage that seeks to sanitize racial oppression. SHE, on the other hand, refuses to let him forget. As HE completes his defense of his vocation, SHE continues to bring him back to his own blackness as she lists epithets HE seems powerless to deny: “My onyx prince,” “My tourmaline king,” “My raven knight,” “My umber squire,” “My Cimmerian lord” (2.6). SHE provides a list of synonyms to complicate HE’s original assertion that impressionable words like “black ... mak[e] no sense ... mak[e] no difference” while the stage directions mark her movements. SHE finds his razor, moves behind him, and positions it against his neck. As HE turns his head, “his neck appears to devour the blade. The razor’s shaft at once hidden by his flesh, swiftly withdraws, leaving a rushing river of red like a scarf billowing around his neck and her hands. HE yields to gravity” (2.6). SHE represents the historical past lurking behind him, initiating his own destructive actions. It is HE who turns his head and his neck that devours the blade. By refusing to confront his past, HE misses the opportunity to transform the pain into something new and, as a result, HE succumbs to the weight of his own destruction.

HE’s death is no surprise to the audience, who have already seen SHE standing above HE’s “motionless” body with the razor in her “bloodied palms” (1.8). Because we know what violence is to come, the plot itself becomes irrelevant. Instead, through her rearrangement of time, Sears asks the audience to consider *how* it is that HE gets there. Like the handkerchief that lies crumpled in his hand, HE’s lifeless body conveys all of the layers of grime that have accumulated across two plays,⁹ exposing the inescapable historical pattern to which any “he” with a similar history is vulnerable. SHE – a conjuration of Shakespeare’s Sybil, who “in her prophetic fury” (3.4.68) wove the family heirloom that would simultaneously connect Othello to his roots and doom him to a tragic death – fulfills her prophecy. Though SHE tries to warn him, HE refuses to see what SHE already knows, and this refusal ends up getting him killed.

In her artistic reinvention of the theater, Sears performs an amazing feat: in the final scene of the 1928 timeline – the penultimate scene in the play – HE is resurrected. The stage directions do not specify whether HE has finally made

⁹ For more on the nature of the crumpled handkerchief see Jonathan Gil Harris, “Crumpled Handkerchiefs: William Shakespeare’s and Michel Serres’s Palimpsested Time,” in Harris, *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 169–87.

it to the stage or rather remains in the margins of the theater within that “tiny dressing room,” but it does indicate that “HE begins to speak, as if rehearsing, at first” (2.9). Returning to the Senate scene in *Othello*, HE recites lines from the famous speech that left the Duke enchanted. “It is most true; true, I have married her,” he says, as he covers his face in black greasepaint, “And often did beguile her of her tears” (2.9). The stage directions state that “HE begins to add a white greasepaint to his lips, completing the mask of the minstrel” (2.9). Joining the Renaissance of early modern England with the Renaissance of the early twentieth century in Harlem, the audience is temporally disoriented: where does this scene fit within the arc of the 1928 timeline? Has HE already died? Or is this the performance that initiates his discussions with SHE? Perhaps HE’s fate is to remain a specter haunting the play? Conjuring both the black minstrel and Othello at once, HE perpetually applies new layers of injustice to himself even as he challenges the audience to reckon with the violent cycle of oppression that has consistently excluded, condemned, and brutalized black bodies.

Sears’s *Harlem Duet* adds to the layers of complexity that shape not only how we see Othello, but also how we come to understand race relations. Her work renegotiates prevailing approaches to Shakespeare’s play even as it calls into question the persistent centering of playwrights like Shakespeare within the theatrical canon. As the epigraphs to this essay indicate, Djanet Sears shares Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream of a more just world, one that not only includes its black citizens but also raises them up. A playwright and woman of color, she turns to the theater to build upon King’s foundation, carving out a space for stories that have been erased or overshadowed by more dominant (often white, male) perspectives. Sears confronts the painful histories and futures shaping black identity by diving deeply into those histories and myths. She reminds us that the most powerful movements are often instigated and carried out by those who inhabit the margins, revealing how generative liminal spaces can be even in the face of injustice.

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