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"I am not my skin. My skin is not me": Djanet Sears Re-tells the canon

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Abstract— *Djanet Sears' blues version of Shakespeare's tragedy Othello turned into Harlem Duet, situates its plot in a new radical setting. The bard's original play set historically between the venetian military citadel and the island of Cyprus, finds modern Othello living in Harlem, New York. Sears's Harlem Duet revolves around the corner of Twentieth Century black militants Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Boulevards, not with Desdemona, but with his first "black" wife, Billie. Focusing on the African-Canadian playwright Djanet Sears Harlem Duet, the play highlights the political aspect through its double resistances against patriarchy and racism in Shakespeare's Othello. Sears's work imagines a prelude to Shakespeare's Othello in a way that transgresses, and revisions the Shakespearean source material via issues of racism (both inter-and-intra-community).*

Keywords— ***African heritage, exclusion, Harlem Duet, miscegenation, Othello, racism***

I. INTRODUCTION

Harlem Duet throws into question the very nature of the source itself as a source of the racism Sears examines. Sears' work, in this mode, is not about faithful adherence to the narrative or performative conventions of traditional Shakespeare practice, but about the degree to which the playwright can transform that material into a counter-discourse that de-forms conventions in such a way that underpin tradition. In *Harlem Duet*, Sears uses specific details to enhance her play's themes. A cell and brass provide the background music for her work. Audio clips of African-American leaders played throughout the play create thematic depth. The play's title reflects its primary setting; the corner of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X Boulevards. Sears chooses to set her play at this location because as she explains, "I wanted an urban setting that would resonate for all North Americans, and because given that the play is an excavation of the question of importance of race, those boiling points that appear to be more tangible in the US than here. At 125th and 40th, there is an actual intersection that serves as theoretical axis of the arguments in the play" (Knowles, 1998).

II. THE CONTEXT OF *HARLEM DUET*

The play tells the story of Billie, a black American and Othello and their dissolving marriage. As the play develops, Othello turns further away from his partner, and more towards the ideals of a white identity, mainly through his affair with 'Mona', a white American woman who represents Shakespeare's character. In *Harlem Duet*, Sears deals with the influence that a white-dominated, North-American popular culture on the psyche of the African-American. She includes a wide range of prominent historical figures in her piece, such as Booker. T. Washington and Jessie Jackson, emphasizing how these figures have fought against a white-dominated ideal.

Trying to pass as white and to be acknowledged by the white academy at Columbia University, Sears's Othello is constantly reproached by his ex-wife Billie, who regards his engagement with Mona as a stepping stone to admission into the white community. Remembering the day when she sees Othello and Mona together, she utters in a disillusioned tone: "here, before me-his woman-all blonde hair and blonde legs. Her weight against his chest. His arm around

her shoulders, his thumb resting on the gold of her hair" (Sears, 1997)

III. THE REPUDIATION OF ONE'S ORIGINS

Repudiating his African background and cultural heritage, Othello states: "I am not minor (…) I mean my culture is not my mother's culture-the culture of my ancestors. My culture is Wordsworth, Shaw (…). A few lines later, he states: "I am an American. The slaves were freed over 130 years ago. In 1967, it was illegal for a Black to marry a white in sixteen states (…) Things can change, Billie. I am not my skin. My skin is not me" (305). The author's characterization and intricately plot-woven ideas unfold with a great understanding of and relevance to cultural identity issues. Sears not only deals with the individual's struggle, but also shines the spotlight on the importance of positive community leaders and progression. The play is most certainly Billie's, and not Othello's, a definite departure from Shakespeare's story. Through shifting the focus onto Billie, Sears opens the well-known story of Othello to interpretation, and forces audiences to think about the causes and the effects that are present in human relations. By *retelling* O*thello*, Sears dramatizes the historic trauma of miscegenation from a perspective that is excluded from other versions of the story. In so doing, she dramatizes both the historic exclusion of Black women from the *Othello* story, and the desire to rectify this exclusion, by literally putting the black woman at the centre stage. Shakespeare allows Sears to criticise the exclusionary function of the canon while simultaneously asserting her will to be included in it.

IV. DIVERGING FROM SHAKESPEARE'S VERSION

Sears *Harlem Duet* diverges quite radically from Shakespeare's version. It shares the same inciting incident- the sexual union of a Black man and a White woman- and it explores the consequent social rupture and violence. But while Shakespeare's plot uses miscegenation as a trope to dramatize the fears of White society, most post Shakespeare Othellos try to establish other perspectives on interracial sex and its consequences. As Jacqulyn Mc Lendon writes, African-American males have sought to "revise dominant narratives that interpret the psychology of the black male in white terms" (Lendon, 1997). In *Harlem Duet*, Sears imagines the previously untold perspective of a black woman to show that, in addition to the well-known consequences it has for Othello, his choice to take a White wife also has a catastrophic effect on the people he leaves behind. Examining the consequences of miscegenation in three distinct chronotypes, Sears takes Shakespeare's rootless *O*thello, gives him a home in Harlem, shifting the focus away from the White community he tries to join, and on the Black community from which he comes and the people who live there.

In addition, because she wants to emphasize that her adapted *Othello* is not an isolated incident but a trauma repeated countless times throughout African-American history, Sears shows not 'one' Othello but 'three', each rooted in a significant moment in history. The story of what happens to Billie and Othello after he leaves her for a white woman is told and retold in three distinct plots, each reflecting a prominent era in African history: one just before Emancipation, in which Othello and Billie are slaves, (the pre 1860); one at the height of Harlem Renaissance in 1928, in which he is a minstrel actor; and in the present day (1990s), where Othello is an English professor and Billie is a stalled graduate student. The central, present-day plot includes other characters such as Billie's landlord, Magi; her sister, Amah; and her father, Canada, and Othello's new lover Mona (all of them being absent in Shakespeare's original play).

The play explores Billie's abjection in the wake of Othello's desertion, following her descent into depression, rage, and finally nervous breakdown. The trauma at the centre of each plot is the same: *Harlem Duet* focuses on the effects of miscegenation, not for Othello, Desdemona, or white society, but for the Black woman and the community Othello leaves behind.

While Shakespeare stages *Othello* on the periphery of white European society, Sears recontextualises it geographically and historically in the heart of Black America, situating it in times and places that signify particular positions in the field of racial convergence and conflict. Her characters are understood from the perspective of a Black community, "a fundamental shift in focus" from Shakespeare's version (Fischlin & Mortier, 2008). These characters are at home, not outsiders, although they are also conscious of the fact that this home is totally encircled, contained, and encroached upon by white America. In her analysis of the play, Linda Burnett clearly differentiates between "the deconstructivist postmodernism" and "the constructivist postcolonialism" of *Harlem Duet*. In her essay, "Redescribing a World: Towards a Theory of Shakespearean Adaptation in Canada", she writes:

> Whereas postmodernism uses irony simply to tear down, postcolonialism uses it both to diassemble and to reassemble. It goes beyond the deconstruction of the texts that make up our cultural history to create new texts in which the old stories are re-imagined and reinterpreted from formerly excluded perspectives (Burnett, 2002).

The fact that no single character could be stigmatized as the oppressor and that even Mona, emerging as a silenced woman, awaits her tragic end in Shakespeare's *Othello* refutes the replacement of the oppressor by the victimized. Since there is no shift of roles between the victim and the victimizer, but rather a general depiction of many victims, the play refrains from any essentialism. Being aware of the danger of canonical counter discourses of postcolonial theory, Linda Burnett clarifies the supposed aim of postcolonial theory:

> Postcolonialism's ultimate goal is not to defeat and replace these narratives (of colonialism, nationalism, patriarchy etc.) with its own master narrative. Its goal is not to vanquish the stories that have been told, even those that have been told from the perspective of the colonizer. Rather it is to advance narratives to stand beside (in addition to) earlier narratives. Its attempt is not so much to offer 'counter-narratives to the long tradition of European imperial narratives'- as it is to offer narratives that act to counterbalance those earlier univocal narratives (Ibid).

As Leslie Sanders writes that, "Othello has a context: he comes from somewhere, has a country, and has a world view" (Sanders, 2000). And he not only comes from somewhere, but also repeatedly abandons that somewhere in order to enjoy the benefits of inclusion in white culture. Sears's *Othello,* as Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier point out, must deal with the consequences of *not* being excluded from the community, "where community becomes a highly charged code for white culture as an arbitrary index against which one is (problematically) measured for inclusion or exclusion" (Fischlin & Fortier, 2008).

The mimetic spaces, (being audible or visible to the audience), of *Harlem Duet* are "the steps of a blacksmith's forge", in the 1860s, "a tiny dressing room" in 1928, and most importantly, Billie's apartment at the corner of Malcolm and Martin Luther King Boulevard in Harlem. Billie's apartment is the dominant location and she never leaves it until the final scene. The mimetic space being is, thus, restricted to very specific interior locations (forge, dressing room, apartment), Sears uses diegetic referents, (hints referred to by the characters) to reinforce the connections between these private mimetic spaces and the Black community to which they belong. In addition to the dialogue, a soundscape of speeches and music of Black political, spiritual, and cultural leaders links the dramatic space to African-America in general. Fischlin and Fortier note that the verbal and non-verbal sign systems in the play, the characters, dialogue, setting, and soundscape place "black experience at the heart of the play's visual and literary representations," explicitly constructing the play as a nexus for different forms of black voice (Ibid). If the voices in the soundscape establish the stage as a cultural political nexus for the black voice, the characters establish the space as the centre of a personal experience of African-American particularly Billie and Othello:

> OTHELLO: I never thought I'd miss Harlem
>
> *(Pause)*
>
> BILLIE: You still think it's a reservation?
>
> OTHELLO: Homeland/reservation.
>
> BILLIE: A sea of Black faces.
>
> OTHELLO: Africatown, USA.
>
> *(Pause)*
>
> BILLIE: When we lived in the village, sometimes I'd be on the subway and I'd miss my stop…And I'd just walk. I love seeing all these brown faces.
>
> OTHELLO: Yeh…
>
> BILLIE: Since they knocked down the old projects, I can see the Schomburg Museum from here. You still can't make out Harlem Hospital. I love that I can see the Apollo from my balcony (56-7).

This passage fulfils several functions. First, it enriches the dramatic space by linking the mimetic space of the apartment to the diegetic space of Harlem and anchoring both at the centre of African-American experience. Second, the landmarks mentioned- the museum, the hospital, and the theatre- all establish Harlem as the centre of African-American culture and achievement (the "projects", on the other hand, are now a thing of the past). Harlem, thus, acquires positive and restorative connotations, as well. The vision of Harlem as the centre of an encompassing Black American culture is not, however, unproblematic, as Othello's ambivalence indicates: "is Harlem a reservation or a homeland?" Magi, Billie's Landlord, too, recognizes the potential problems of identifying Harlem as the centre of an African American universe; what Othello calls "Africatown, USA," she (Billie) calls "the Soweto of America" (25). Throughout the play, Harlem is represented ambiguously and problematically; it is a stronghold, but also a ghetto. Billie's conception of Harlem as the heart of the Black world is troubled, too: like white racists, she is disturbed by the presence of the monstrous "Other" on the margins of her world always encroaching upon its borders and yet necessary to make those borders visible. The threat of contamination is diegetically embodied in what Magi calls "Harlumbia": "those ten square blacks of whitedom, owned by Columbia university, set smack, dab in the middle of Harlem" (67). Here, in the centre of Billie's African-American haven, is a powerful symbol of the white culture

that excluded Billie, a stalled graduate student, and consumed her along with her ex-husband. (Othello, after breaking up with Billie, renewed his relationship with a white American woman "Mona"). Thus, though Harlem has many positive qualities, Billie's attempt to claim it as a sanctuary from the evils of whiteness is ultimately futile.

The 1928 scenes fashion an equally important diegetic space in the play; that of the stage itself. The mimetic space is a "tiny dressing room" at the theatre where Othello performs in minstrel shows. Othello, as a minstrel actor, makes a living representing his own Otherness, and his dream is to perform in the world of the white, "legitimate" theatre, and to perform white roles: "I'll not die in black face to pay the rent. I am of Ira Aldridge stock…" (98)[1]. "I long to play the Scottish king. The prince of Denmark" (99). In this articulation of the story, Othello's desire for Mona, now a theatre director who gives him the chance to play Shakespeare, is tied again to her gaze: "Mona sees my gift," he says (99). Yet, it is not only Mona's gaze, but also the collective gaze of the theatre that Othello craves for, and the chance to be legitimized by playing Shakespeare. In fact, Othello's last words in *Harlem Duet* are Shakespeare's; when he leaves Billie's apartment for the last time, he enters 1928 again, and we see him "blackening up" for a minstrel performance while reciting Othello's speeches to the Venetian senate, in which he tells how he and Desdemona courted each other. In these lines, spoken in front of a real audience, by a Black actor playing a Black actor putting on a black face; and spoken as if he were rehearsing them in a mimetic off-stage space just before stepping on stage to perform blackness in front of a diegetic white audience. Othello reiterates his obsession with the white female gaze: "…My story being done, /she gave me for my pains a world of sighs/ she wished she had not heard it, yet she wished/ That heaven had made her such a man" (113). Therefore, in Shakespeare's words, Othello symbolically leaves Sears's mimetic space and enters the diegetic space of Shakespeare and more importantly Desdemona.

Desdemona, known as Mona or Miss Dessy in *Harlem Duet* represents Sears's most significant use of diegetic space. In *Harlem Duet*, as in Ann-Marie Mac Donald's *Goodnight Desdemona* (1988) and Rossow-B. Kellogg's *Lear's Daughters* (1986), the emphasis on new characters does not entail the appearance of Shakespeare's characters. Instead, they are reallocated to diegetic space, where they nevertheless continue to play important roles. There is such a diegetic holdover in Sears's work. Mona serves two important purposes: first, recycling the Shakespearean characters strengthens the connection between *Harlem Duet* and *Othello*. Second, she allows Sears to play the peculiar game of Shakespeare's adaptations, whereby they get to "have their cultural authority and eat it too" (Knowles, 2004). Playwrights like Sears contest Shakespeare's omnifarious high cultural authority. However, they often exploit it by rewarding "the cognoscenti with the pleasures of recognition" (Ibid). For instance, there is an element of playfulness in discovering through Othello's announcement that he has been awarded an important teaching post. How fully Sears has conceived her vision of how Othello would fare as an English professor rather than a military commander. More importantly, though, as characters who are repeatedly mentioned but never appear, the diegetic presence "accentuates" the mimetic absence of whiteness. There are numerous references to the (white) world outside Harlem. We see Magi, Billie's Landlord, "reading a magazine with a large picture of a blonde woman on the cover" (24) and hear Amah, Billie's sister, complain that she needs a "two-year course" on how to do white people's hair and make-up" (26) in order to get a cosmetician's certificate, but white characters are pointedly absent from the stage.

Just once, the convention of banishing whiteness from mimetic space is waived so to speak, and then all we see of Mona is her arm and "a waft of light brown hair" (47). Yet, the effect of overtly emphasizing the exclusion of white characters from the stage, interestingly, is to endow Whiteness with a menacing diegetic presence. Despite being reduced to an arm, Mona has more authority than any onstage character. When she arrives in (I.5) to pick Othello up at the apartment, the mere voice of the unseen Mona, which we hear on the apartment's intercom, and subsequently, her *silence*, have a marked effect on Othello, who has just been cheating on his new wife with his ex-wife.

> MONA: *(Through intercom)* It's Mona. Could I have a word with
>
> Othello?
>
> OTHELLO: (*OVERLAPPING)* Shit!
>
> BILLIE: One second please
>
> *He rushes to the intercom, while attempting to put his clothes back on. BILLIE tries to hold back her laughter. Her laughter begins to infect OTHELLO. He puts a finger over his mouth indicating to BIILLIE to be quiet.)*

[1] Ira Aldridge was the first Black actor to play Othello, so it is somewhat ironic that Sears writes an Othello who wants to play Ira Aldridge.

> OTHELLO: Hey Mone…Mone, I'm not done yet. There is more here than I imagined. Why don't I call you when I'm done? *(MONA does not respond*. OTHELLO's *demeanour changes)*.
>
> OTHELLO: Mona? Mona? I'm coming, OK?
>
> I'll be right…Just wait there for a second, OK? OK? (61).

Even as absent and "silent", Mona's presence shatters the apparent reconciliation between Othello and Billie. Othello's reaction to her silence demonstrates her power over him, and the soundscape cue at the top of the scene saturates the episode with a sharp irony: *"Malcolm X speaks about the need for Blacks to turn their gaze away from Whiteness so that they can see each other with new eyes"* (60). The use of the miscegenation trope in *Harlem Duet* is all the more powerful because, in its symbolic economy, the White woman is conceived as so dangerous and Othered as to be denied representation. Sears's adapted *Othello* bestows upon her audience a very intelligent and thought-provoking piece of work. The present-day issue of human relations in North America is instantaneously raised and its position in the play is focused upon when the lives of the multi-racial characters are illustrated.

Sears carefully establishes each character's place in the play with much consideration. They all present and uphold not only a distinctive voice, but also a caring and collective one as well. The accumulated effect of Djanet Sears's dramaturgical tactics of re-telling, the historical and cultural relocation of the Othello story, the recontextualization of miscegenation from a Black woman's perspective, and her use of dramatic space to create a world that both mimetically valorises Blackness and is yet threatened by diegetic Whiteness that Susan Bennett labelled as the "default position for the western audience" (Bennett, 1995). The conspicuous absence of white characters from the mimetic space of *Harlem Duet,* "forces the audience, regardless of who they are, into viewing the play from the perspective of black audiences" (sanders, 2000).

The need to accustom Shakespeare's text to a new surrounding and circumstances by Djanet Sears was motivated by a need to rectify a sense of exclusion from the imaginary universal human experience for which Shakespeare is so often made to stand. *Harlem Duet*, in fact, works in the two directions at once. By subjecting *Othello* to a rigorous critique from a long-excluded point of view, it reveals that the canonical text and the canon in general, have stopped well short of representing a "universal" experience. And yet, by retelling the canonical text, she also claims a place within that canon for the previously excluded subjectivity, providing "an experience of how those 'other' in a culture might feel dislocated by the dominant culture, and wish to dislocate and challenge its premises" (Ibid). Sears's re-telling of the *Othello* plot invites her spectators to consider a point of view that has often been as absent from our stage as it was from Shakespeare.

V. CONCLUSION

Quoting from Lyotard, Ashcroft states that a post-colonial work has to be postmodern as well so as to avoid creating its own new metanarrartives (Ashcroft & Griffiths, 1989) Likewise, in *Harlem Duet* the intermingling of post-colonialism and post-modernism is harmonized so well that no value dominates over the others. Placing itself at the crossroads of many theories and discourses, *Harlem Duet* emerges as a postmodern, and postcolonial rewriting both resisting Shakespeare's dominance and appreciating his greatness. As the postmodern disruption of single time, space and character provides the play's liberal aspect, the post-colonial perspective presents us with the political side of the issue. As the title of the play suggests what Sears tries to form is a duet; therefore every discourse has its counter-discourse in the play, which makes the play unique and causes it to be liberated from firmly clinging to any essentialism or canon and from privileging any ideology.

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