An Other Othello: Djanet Sears’s Appropriation of Shakespeare

I have a dream. A dream that one day in the city where I live, at any given time of year, I will be able to find a 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 they take for granted. (Djanet Sears in Knowles 1998: 14)

The Shakespeare’s mine, but you can have it. (Billie, in Harlem Duet)

In a 1998 interview with Ric Knowles, Djanet Sears says, “Before Harlem Duet, Canadian Stage had never produced a work by an author of … African descent. And the problem with Canadian Stage is that it’s called Canadian Stage, and it represents Canada, and I’m thinking, ‘I’m Canadian, so it must represent me’” (Knowles 1998: 30). Although Sears speaks specifically to the experience of being un-represented in Canada, the frustration she voices is also shared by those who feel excluded from Shakespearean canon. One of the most powerful ways to respond to the feeling that one has been excluded from a culture by being omitted from its stories is to retell them, to rectify that exclusion by carving out a place for one’s self and for those with whom one feels solidarity. In Harlem Duet, Djanet Sears retells Othello, dramatizing 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 centre stage. Through a close examination of Sears’s dramaturgical tactics, particularly her manipulation of dramatic time and space, I aim to show how appropriating
Shakespeare allows Sears to critique the exclusionary function of the canon while simultaneously asserting her will to be included in it. This analysis aims to shed light on *Harlem Duet*, and also on the specific playwriting techniques Sears applies in rewriting Shakespeare.

*Harlem Duet* is a descendant of *Othello*, yet also its prequel: though set in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the plot recounts events antecedent to those of the parent text. As a prequel, its plot does not share much with that of *Othello*, yet it can still be characterized as an appropriation or re-telling of Shakespeare’s tale. To clarify the distinction between Othello’s *story* and its numerous re-tellings, it is helpful to adopt the Russian Formalist distinction between *fabula* (story) and *sjuzet* (plot) (see Aston and Savona, 1991: 20-25). *Fabula* refers to the chronological sequence of events in a story, and *sjuzet* to their re-presentation in a specific telling. Shakespeare’s *Othello* is neither the original nor the definitive version of this *fabula*, only the most influential *sjuzet*. There are of course many other Othellos, including at least two other Canadian stage adaptations in the last three decades, as pointed out by Ric Knowles in his recent article “Othello in Three Times.”

Most of the other Othellos, from Amiri Baraka’s *Dutchman* to Paula Vogel’s *Desdemona*, although they diverge quite radically from Shakespeare’s version, share the same inciting incident – the sexual union of a Black man and a White woman – and all explore the consequent social rupture and violence. But while Shakespeare’s *sjuzet* used miscegenation as a trope to dramatize the fears of White society, most post-Shakespeare Othellos try to establish other(ed) perspectives on interracial sex and its consequences. As Jacqulyn McLendon writes, African-American males such as Baraka have sought to
“revise dominant narratives that interpret the psychology of the black male in white terms” (McLendon: 122). Similarly, female playwrights such as Vogel and Anne-Marie MacDonald, have offered re-tellings of Othello from Desdemona’s point of view. 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.

Sears’s objective informs the tactics and techniques of her appropriation. In order to illuminate a previously untold experience of miscegenation, she literally puts the spotlight on it: the onstage space of Harlem Duet is dominated by Black women, especially Othello’s first wife, Billie, while the White society and characters of Shakespeare’s sjuzet wait in the wings. Examining the consequences of miscegenation in three distinct chronotopres, Sears takes Shakespeare’s rootless Othello, gives him a home in Harlem, shifting the focus away from the White community he tries to join, and on to the Black community from which he comes and the people who live there. In addition, because she wants to emphasize that the Othello fabula is not an isolated incident, resolved by the deaths of the transgressors, but a trauma repeated countless times throughout African-American history, she shows not one Othello but three, each rooted in a significant moment in that history. Sears’s careful manipulation of dramatic time and space, and particularly the balance of on- and offstage space, are powerful and effective tactics in a sophisticated dramaturgy of appropriation.

The story of what happens to Billie¹ and Othello after he leaves her for a White

---

¹ Billie’s name, short for “Sybil” (which Billie hates), comes from the lines in Othello about the famous handkerchief that Othello gives to Desdemona: “A sibyl … In her prophetic fury sewed the work” (3.4.72-4). Othello also calls her ‘Egyptian,’ making her the only African woman mentioned in Shakespeare’s play.
woman is told and retold in three distinct plots, each reflecting a prominent era in
African-American history: one just before Emancipation, in which Billie and Othello are
slaves; one at the height of the Harlem Renaissance in 1928, in which he is a minstrel
actor; and in the present day, 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. In addition, all three plots
make use of offstage characters, particularly Othello’s new lover, Mona. 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 community – he leaves
behind.

While Shakespeare stages *Othello* on the periphery of White European society,
Sears recontextualizes it geographically and historically in the heart of Black America,
situating it in times and places that signify particular positions in the field of (North
American) 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 and Fortier: 286b). 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. Staging Othello as a native instead of an other
is critically important to Sears’s re-vision of miscegenation. As Leslie Sanders writes,
this “gives Othello a context: he comes from somewhere, has a country, has a world

---

2 I have not decided whether it is more appropriate to describe the play as having three *sjuzets*, one
especially elaborate *sjuzet*, or perhaps three sub-*sjuzets* constituting a super-*sjuzet*. 
view” (2001: 557). And he not only comes from somewhere, but also repeatedly abandonment that somewhere in order to enjoy the benefits of inclusion in White culture: “his choice of whiteness,” says Sanders, “is not singular, and is always dangerous” (558).

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 word for white culture as an arbitrary index against which one is (problematically) measured for inclusion or exclusion” (286a).

Sears’s manipulation of dramatic space is more complex than simply “setting Othello in Harlem.” Her dramaturgy, the ways she “sets” the play in Harlem, using dialogue, stage directions, and soundscape, are worth a close look, especially her use of dramatic space. In “Space and Reference in Drama,” Michael Issacharoff notes that dramatic space includes both onstage (mimetic) and offstage (diegetic) referents (215). Mimetic space, being visible (or audible) to the audience, is transmitted directly to us, whereas diegetic space “is described, that is, referred to by the characters,” and is therefore communicated verbally, not visually (215). Sears’s extensive use of the interplay of mimetic and diegetic space in Harlem Duet is critical to her exploration of a Black, female perspective on Othello. First, Sears uses dialogue to situate the limited mimetic spaces of the play within the larger diegetic space of Harlem. Second, she uses diegetic references to endow this space, however problematically, with particular qualities and values as the heart of Black America. Third, she populates the diegetic world with characters who, though they never appear on stage, are still critical components of the play. Finally, throughout the play White characters and objects are so emphatically exorcized from mimetic space that they accrue a powerful diegetic presence
that threatens to overwhelm the mimetic space.

The mimetic spaces of *Harlem Duet* are “the steps of a blacksmith’s forge” in
the1860s, “a tiny dressing room” in 1928, and, most importantly, Billie’s apartment at the
corner of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Boulevards in Harlem\(^3\). Billie’s apartment
is the dominant location, and she never leaves it until the final scene. The mimetic space
being thus restricted to very specific interior locations (forge, dressing room, apartment),
Sears uses diegetic referents 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 by Black political, spiritual, and cultural leaders links
the dramatic space to African-America in general. Fischlin and Fortier note that both 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 (286b).

If the voices in the soundscape establish the stage as a cultural/political nexus for
Black voice, the characters establish the space as the centre of a personal experience of
African America, particularly Billie and Othello:

OTHELLO: I never thought I’d miss Harlem.

(Pause.)

BILLIE: You still think it’s a reservation?

OTHELLO: Homeland/reservation.

---

\(^{3}\) The precise location and time of year are made explicit in Amah’s rather awkwardly expository first line:
‘Magi, look at you, out on the terrace, watching the summer blossoms on the corner of Malcolm X and
Martin Luther King Boulevards’ (25).
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 Schomberg Museum from here. You still can’t make out Harlem Hospital. I love that I can see the Apollo from our – from my balcony. (56-7)

This passage fulfills 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). In addition, when the reminiscence brings about a shift in tone that ends a heated argument and leads to a romantic reconciliation – however brief – the imaginary Harlem 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, too, recognizes the potential problems of identifying Harlem as the centre of an African-American universe; what Othello calls “Africatown, USA,” she
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 10 square blocks 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 has excluded Billie, a stalled graduate student, and consumed her husband. Thus, though Harlem has many positive qualities, Billie’s attempt to claim it as a sanctuary from the evils of Whiteness is ultimately futile.

Like the central plot, the historical subplots make extensive use of diegetic space. In 1860, Him and Her initiate a romantic game later repeated by Billie and Othello in their present-day incarnations, in which Him maps out Her body as American territory in an anachronistic allusion to Martin Luther King Jr.’s ‘I Have a Dream’ speech:

(HIM kisses inside the crook of HER’s arm.)

HER: Oh-oh. You’re prospecting again.

HIM: I’m exploring the heightening Allegenies of Pennsylvania.

(HIM kisses HER.)

The curvaceous slopes of California.

(HIM kisses HER.)

The red hills of Georgia, the mighty mountains of New York.

(HIM kisses HER again.)
I’m staking my claim.

HER: I don’t come cheap, you know.

HIM: I know. I’m offering much more than money can buy. (36)

Challenging the colonial metaphor of the American landscape as a passive, virginal territory to be possessed and cultivated by White European patriarchy, Sears envisions America as a Black woman who asserts her right to evaluate the claim staked by Othello.

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. The primary offstage space, therefore, is a stage. This 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 stock⁴… 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 to 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, and the chance to be legitimized by performing 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 blackface; and spoken as if he was

---

⁴ Ira Aldridge, of course, was the first Black actor to play Othello, so it’s somewhat ironic that Sears writes an Othello who wants to play Ira Aldridge.
rehearsing them in a mimetic off-stage space just before stepping on/off-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). Thus 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 Desdemona, Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning, Juliet), and Lear’s Daughters, the emphasis on new characters does not entail the disappearance of the Shakespearean characters. Instead, Shakespeare’s characters are reallocated to diegetic space, where they nevertheless continue to play important roles. There are two such diegetic holdovers in Harlem Duet, Mona (known as “Miss Dessy” in 1860) and Chris Yago, and they serve two important purposes. First, recycling the Shakespearean characters strengthens the connection between Harlem Duet and Othello, and allows Sears to play the peculiar game of Shakespeare appropriations, whereby they get to “have their cultural authority and eat it too,” as Ric Knowles writes in “Othello in Three Times” (2002: 144). On the one hand, playwrights like Sears contest Shakespeare’s omnifarious high cultural authority, but on the other, they often exploit it by rewarding “the cognoscenti with the pleasures of recognition” (2002: 148)⁵. More importantly, though, as characters who are repeatedly mentioned but never appear, their diegetic presence accentuates the mimetic absence of Whiteness. There are numerous references to the (White) world outside Harlem – we see

---

⁵ For example, there is an element of playfulness in discovering, through Othello’s offhand announcement that he has been awarded an important teaching post expected to go to Chris Yago, how fully Sears has conceived her vision of how Othello would fare as an English professor rather than a military commander.
Magi “reading a magazine with a large picture of a blonde woman on the cover” (24), and hear Amah complain that she needs a “two year course on how to do White people’s hair and make-up” (26)⁶ 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, a waft of hair, and an otherwise disembodied voice, Mona has more authority than any onstage character. When she arrives in act one, scene five 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 BILLIE to be quiet.)

OTHELLO: Hey Mone… Mone, I’m not done yet. There’s more here than I imagined. Why don’t I call you when I’m done.

---

⁶ The fight to force states to deregulate hair-braiding rages on, according to recent headlines.
(MONA does not respond. OThELLO’s demeanour changes.)


Even 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.

Constructing the (Black) Subject/Spectator

The accumulated effect of Djanet Sears’s dramaturgical tactics of appropriation – the historical and cultural relocation of the Othello fabula, the recontextualization of miscegenation from a Black woman’s perspective, and her use of dramatic space to create a world that both mimetically valorizes Blackness and is yet threatened by diegetic Whiteness – is to challenge the “hegemonic whiteness” that Susan Bennett says is the “default position for the Western audience” (Bennett 1995: 19). The conspicuous absence of White characters from the mimetic space of Harlem Duet, as Leslie Sanders says, “forces the audience, regardless of who they are, into viewing the play from the perspective of black audiences” (Sanders: 558).

This brings me back to my point of departure. At the beginning of this paper, I suggested that the appropriation of Shakespeare by new authors is often motivated by a need to rectify a sense of exclusion from the imaginary universal human experience for
which Shakespeare is so often (and so unfairly) made to stand. *Harlem Duet*, in fact, works in 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, has stopped well short of a representing a “universal” experience. And yet, by appropriating the canonical text, she also claims a place within that canon for that previously excluded subjectivity, providing “an experience of how those ‘other’ in a culture might feel dislocated by the dominant culture, and wish themselves to dislocate and challenge its premises” (Sanders: 558). Sears’ re-telling of the *Othello fabula* invites – or forces – her spectators to consider a point of view that has often been as absent from our stage as it was from Shakespeare’s.
Works Cited


-----------------. “nOTES oF a cOLOURED gIRL:32 rEASONS wHY i wRITE fOR tHE tHEATRE.” *Harlem Duet*. Toronto: Scirocco Drama, 1997. 11-15.