

Race, Rhyme, and Ritual: Intertextual Tropes of Africa(ness) in 20th Century Yoruba

Plays and Contemporary Adaptations of *Othello*.

By

Diana Mafe

MA Research Project

Advisor: Dr. Daniel Fischlin

August 3, 2003

In her novel, *Esprit de Battuta: Alone Across Africa on a Bicycle*, Pamela Watson, a white woman from Australia, chronicles her year and a half bicycle trip across Africa. In describing her preparations for this journey, she expresses the following sentiment: “Even in my naïvety, I knew Africa would not be so easy” (Watson 12). This simplistic statement indicates the desire of yet another Westerner to “conquer” Africa in one form or another. Despite the fact that Watson is referring specifically to her bicycle journey across the African continent, there is a hint of challenge in her words that recalls the first Western explorers and their historic encounters with the continent that “would not be so easy.” The sixteenth-century Englishman, George Best, writes the following account of Africa in his 1578 text, *Discourse*, which was later printed in Hakluyt’s *Principal Navigations*: “Africa remained for Cham and his blacke sonne Chus, and was called Chamesis after the fathers [*sic*] name, being perhaps a cursed, dry, sandy, and unfruitfull ground, fit for such a generation to inhabite in” (qtd. in Lim 131). Watson’s text (like Best’s text) is yet another literary example of a Western individual writing “Africa” and constructing “African-ness” according to experiences and perceptions that rely on a Eurocentric tradition.

My concern in this paper is with the *representation* of “Africa(ness)” and the evidence/evolution of that sign in global literature. I have highlighted the term “representation” because it is a crucial factor in my examination of “Africa(ness)” as a literary construct. W. J. T. Mitchell stresses the importance of understanding the *metaphoricity* of literature in his article on representation: “Probably the most common and naïve intuition about literature is that it is a ‘representation of life’” (11). Literature represents an imagined idea of life rather than life itself. In the context of my argument,

the first thing to clarify is that the “Africa(ness)” studied here (and anywhere in literature) is always an *imagined* trope (vehicle) figuring the supposed reality of Africa(ness) (tenor). The second thing to note is that a “real” or “authentic” Africa(ness) does not exist whereas many essentialist notions of what Africa represents do exist: “Reality itself begins to be experienced as an endless network of representations” (Mitchell 16). It is impossible to establish a fixed definition or identity of Africa(ness) since Africa as a reductive and essentialist trope remains an imagined continental space supporting imagined nation spaces, peoples, and communities.

Kim Hall addresses this difficulty of defining African-ness in her text, *Things of Darkness*, and opts to use the term, “black” over “African” in her study of people related to Africa by birth or descent:

“Black,” encompasses the peoples of the African diaspora without having to make attributions of nationality and culture that have been erased from historical records or do not obtain in the early period. For example, is an African just brought to the American colonies “African-American”? Similarly, should African slaves brought to England (and expelled) before 1600 be called Afro-English or Afro-British? (8)

Hall acknowledges that “black” is also a problematic term that risks the erasure of “very real and significant cultural differences” (8). She maintains, however, that the use of the term absolves her of having to negotiate through such spaces and identities as “African-American” or “Afro-British.” While I agree with Hall’s admonition that “African” is too broad a description for “the organization of communities within the continent” (8), her substitution of the term “black” does not mediate the complexity of dealing with the African diaspora because “black” is also a general sign. Hall points out specific examples of situations where it becomes difficult to determine an individual’s African-ness, but does not address the arguably greater challenge of determining an individual’s

blackness. Her decision to “[encompass] the peoples of the African diaspora” under a banner of blackness is a flawed approach to addressing the heterogeneity of African-ness. Blackness is a potential rather than universal sign of African-ness.

Such signs (as blackness) are, however, worth identifying and mapping onto the different cultures and traditions that have come out of the imagined space that is Africa. To use Watson’s text as an example, the Africa(ness) represented in her text probably concurs with the reality of the people and communities that she encountered on her journey. Watson’s account is clearly based on the “real” people and countries of Africa and she substantiates her text with photographs, maps, and a log that carefully charts her progress. In this way, her novel is ostensibly an honest representation of Africa and its people, at least from her own point of view. But by virtue of being representational, Watson’s text becomes removed from the material reality of her journey and the (supposed) material reality of Africa. Mitchell comments on this unavoidable break between reality and representation: “Every representation exacts some cost, in the form of lost immediacy, presence, or truth, in the form of a gap between intention and realization, original and copy” (Mitchell 21). Watson’s status as a non-African must also be factored into her experiences and ideas regarding Africa(ness). Watson can only view Africa through a foreign gaze and the decided Eurocentricity of that gaze. Despite photographs and a putatively accurate account of her journey, her text remains an example of the Western Self describing/defining the Other through literary representation.

What I am arguing toward here is the answer to a fundamental question: How has the literary construct/trope of Africa(ness) developed across time, continents, and

cultures? Subsumed within this question are the complex historical issues regarding the invention that is Africa. In order to truly define how the trope of Africa(ness) has developed, it would be necessary to establish the cultural exchange that took place during the first European encounters with African people and trace the global circulation of European ideas regarding Africa(ness). It would then be necessary to examine the impact of the slave trade, colonialism, and racism on the development of an imagined concept of Africa(ness) and an African consciousness (such as one may be said to exist). All of these elements are significant in the reading and writing of Africa(ness).

Following the fulfillment of the above stipulations, one would then have to examine every literary representation of Africa(ness) ever documented, from ancient times to the present, if only to execute an absolutely thorough examination of Africa(ness) in literature. The term “Africa” is itself a Western invention applied by Latin scholars to a province in the Roman empire: “Greek writers sometimes use the term ‘Libyans’ (*Libyes*) in a restricted sense to refer to the native subjects of Carthage...Latin writers, presumably transcribing some Punic or Libyan name, call the same people *Afri*. The name *Africa* (‘Land of the Afri’) was originally applied to the Roman province created out of the conquered Carthaginian territory in 146 BC” (Fage 129). “Africa” has since become an overly broad sign that connotes an association with that continent but fails to represent the unique peoples and cultures that often have only their geography in common.

Although I cannot accomplish in this paper all those tasks that I briefly outline above, I do intend to begin the process of answering my initial question regarding the development of “Africa(ness)” by examining that trope as a construct of four specific

individuals. These writers and their dramatic texts will illustrate one aspect of literary evolution where tropes of Africa(ness) are concerned. Furthermore, these texts will begin to establish the intercultural exchange of ideas that is so crucial to the development and representation of Africa(ness) as a sign in today's globalized literary economy. As Kadiatu Kanneh states, "Revealing the links between a range of disciplines that have constructed 'Africa' as a discursive object invested with meanings, I argue that an analysis of how African identities are made meaningful relies on attention to the construction of Africa *across* and *between* disciplines" (1).

Kanneh's argument articulates precisely the notion of intercultural exchange that I am positing here and the imagining/inventing of "Africa" through the circulation of ideas via cross-cultural encounters. In a very literal sense, "Africa" was initially constructed through Latin/Western writers' encounter with a Punic or Libyan linguistic sign, and their interpretation, translation, and representation of that sign as a cultural Other. Kanneh stresses the importance of such encounters and the consequent production of such imagined cultural spaces and identities as African-ness:

Encounter *between* cultures is precisely the moment at which the articulation of signs becomes apparent, caught between the ambivalence, the 'in-between space', of contesting projections and linguistic negotiation. Cultural representation relies, inevitably, on this conjunction, this clash of signification on the borders and limits of cultures, which acknowledge and mediate cultural meaning always as the articulation of difference and otherness: 'Cultures come to be represented by virtue of the processes of iteration and translation through which their meanings are very vicariously addressed to—through—an Other.' (17)

This paper is about the "cultural representation" of Africa(ness) and thus merits an examination of how that representation has been constructed through a knowledge or awareness of Selfhood, Otherness, and the liminal space between those identities.

My examination of Africa(ness) in literature will begin with Shakespeare's *Othello*—a critical example of a race-oriented text that represents the interstice between Africa and Europe. As African-Canadian playwright Djanet Sears points out, “*Othello* is the first African portrayed in the annals of western dramatic literature” (14). For that reason alone, *Othello* is a benchmark text and an appropriate starting point where literary tropes of Africa(ness) are concerned. I must emphasize here that my primary concern in this paper is Africa(ness) rather than blackness; however, when discussing an early modern text like *Othello*, the two tropes are veritably interchangeable. Although blackness is a significant aspect of Africa(ness), and that will continue to be evident throughout this paper, I hope to examine other aspects of imagined Africa(ness) beyond skin color.

Through *Othello*, then, I will examine Africa(ness) as an early modern construct consistently associated with blackness and Otherness. I will further attempt to juxtapose that Western early modern construct with the culture of an ancient black “African” people—the Yoruba.¹ Since African-ness is an indefinite essence, it is impossible to designate any one people as illustrative of that essence. It is useful, however, to specify a relatively homogeneous group, like the Yoruba, as an example of a people that have been codified as “African” according to imagined boundaries. I use the phrase “relatively homogeneous” because the Yoruba, although a recognized ethnic group, retain varying dialects and cultural practices.² For the purpose of this paper, however, seventeenth-

¹ The Yoruba people are located primarily in southwestern Nigeria.

² William Bascom notes the heterogeneity within the Yoruba ethnic group in his text, *The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*: “Originally there was no comprehensive name for the Yoruba as a whole, and people referred to themselves by the name of their subgroup....There is dialectical variation in the Yoruba language...and there is considerable local variation in customs and institutions; but there is sufficient underlying cultural and linguistic unity to consider them as a single ethnic group, large and diverse as it may be” (5-6).

century Yorubaland will be used as a reference point for *Othello* and early modern ideas of Africa(ness). Through *Othello* and Yoruba culture, we can begin to establish how notions of Africa(ness) were circulating in the early modern period and whether there is more than a thread of commonality between signs of Yoruba-ness in seventeenth-century Yorubaland and signs of African-ness in Elizabethan England.

The potential intertextual link between these two cultures and the overlapping tropes between *Othello* and an “African” culture of the same period will lay the foundation for the specific exchange of cultural ideas on Africa(ness) that I am proposing. Given the iconic status of Shakespeare and the idealization of his works on a global scale, it becomes necessary to document what influences were involved in the construction of *Othello*, the first African character in Occidental dramatic literature. This examination will also bring to light whether signs of a culture existing in seventeenth-century Africa (namely the Yoruba) are evident in this literary representation of Africa(ness) by a non-African.

After documenting Africa as a possible (re)source for Shakespeare’s *Othello* in the early modern period, I will then focus on three contemporary dramatic texts. The purpose of introducing twentieth-century plays at this point is to identify the ongoing influence of *Othello* (a play that set the tone for representations of Africa(ness) in Western/Occidental dramatic literature) and Shakespeare on the literary scene today. Keeping in mind my original question regarding the evolution of “Africa(ness)” as a literary construct, one can only chart that evolution by examining tropes of Africa(ness) through different time periods and cultures. I have already identified *Othello* as a seventeenth-century starting point for mapping out literary tropes of Africa(ness). By

fast-forwarding to the twentieth century, we can begin to establish what kind of impact Shakespeare had on (the development of) contemporary representations of Africa(ness) in global literature.

Two of the twentieth-century texts I will be studying here are Yoruba plays by Nigerian writers. Just as I will examine what cultural influences shaped *Othello*, I will also examine what cultural influences shaped these particular plays. I find it significant that West Africa was a possible influence for Shakespeare and Western literature in the form of *Othello*. Now Shakespeare and Western literature in turn, become possible influences for West Africa and the literature that comes out of contemporary Yoruba culture, as signified by these specific plays: “The movement between African and European contexts reveals how Africa and its identities have been crucially informed by the impact of knowledges and interests from *outside* the continent” (Kanneh 1).

The first of the Yoruba plays, Ola Rotimi’s *The Gods are Not to Blame*, is an adaptation of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*. An examination of this text illustrates how Western influences and colonialism have impacted African literature, although “African literature” is another ambiguous term, one that I will deconstruct later on. *The Gods are Not to Blame* will also be an opportunity to address why an African playwright chooses to adapt and revise a prominent Western drama as opposed to drawing on his own extensive cultural history. Rotimi, who was educated during British colonial rule in Nigeria, names Shakespeare as the English playwright who made the greatest impression on him. Ironically, about three and a half centuries earlier, it was Africa (as an imagined concept) that was making an impression on Shakespeare via ethnographic literature and such texts as Leo Africanus’ *History of Africa*. This contemporary study of Yoruba plays

will determine if the intertextual tropes of Africa(ness) identified between *Othello* and Yoruba culture extend into the twentieth century and further the notion of cultural interplay that I am examining.

Duro Ladipo's *Oba Waja (The King is Dead)* is the second Yoruba play I will examine in this paper. Like Rotimi, Ladipo sets his play in Yorubaland, although his drama is based on a historical event that occurred in Oyo (an ancient Yoruba city) in 1946. *Oba Waja* draws specifically on Yoruba history and culture and represents Yoruba-ness (contemporary African-ness) in a way that Rotimi's play cannot, simply because Rotimi candidly acknowledges Western influences as a prominent factor in his text. *Oba Waja* also provides a foil for tropes of African-ness through the representation of white characters. Although my primary concern is Africa(ness), Ladipo's text includes tropes of British-ness and whiteness (as Other) by characterizing a district officer and his wife. Like *The Gods are Not to Blame*, *Oba Waja* is an opportunity to examine how specific Yoruba plays relate to European ideas of dramatic theatre (and a Shakespearean play like *Othello*). Each of these plays illustrates a Yoruba playwright's portrayal of Africa(ness) through the representation of language, history, and culture and his response to the effects of colonialism and Eurocentrism.

The fourth text that I will examine in my mapping of Africa(ness) as a literary trope over time and continents is, deliberately, an adaptation of *Othello* by an African-Canadian playwright. Djanet Sears' *Harlem Duet* portrays Othello as an African-American man and explores his life in a black community before his immersion in white culture. Sears' text is an important element of this paper for a number of reasons. As a prequel or revision of *Othello*, *Harlem Duet* is not only a product of the evolved Western

tradition that is Shakespeare, but also a direct response to that tradition by a playwright of African descent. There is a link between the Yoruba plays and Sears' play in terms of the appropriation of Western/Shakespearean drama or dramatic technique in order to convey personal (black) history, culture, and perspective. *Harlem Duet* illustrates the extended influence of Shakespeare and the impact of modern West Africa on a British-born, Canadian playwright (of African origin), thus representing a literal/liminal space between Shakespeare and blackness. The tropes of Africa(ness) in the original *Othello* (such as blackness) are extended in Sears' play, but also altered to reflect the history of African-Americans and African-Canadians, as opposed to Africans. As a text that is removed from both Europe and Africa, but reflects both those (imagined) cultures as inspirational, *Harlem Duet* is a critical part of the specific global literary exchange that I am proposing.

Because this paper is about the construct of Africa(ness), it will be useful to critique each of these four dramatic texts in terms of the imagined continental/historical space that is Africa. For example, does Sears' blackness (as a trope of African-ness) validate her representation of Africa(ness), a validation that Watson could not achieve despite a greater exposure to Africa? Furthermore, do Rotimi and Ladipo, as part of the imagined community of "Africans" convey more realistic representations of African-ness in their texts, even though "real" African-ness cannot be defined? Underlying these questions is the global influence of Shakespeare and the mediation and shaping of Africa(ness) via that widely-disseminated tradition. By examining tropes of Africa(ness) from an early modern English perspective, a contemporary Yoruba perspective, and a contemporary Canadian perspective, we can establish how ideas of Africa(ness) evolve and overlap through the intercultural exchange of those ideas. These texts will further

illustrate how the construct of Africa(ness) has manifested itself in specific dramatic works spanning three continents.

Of Moors and Men...

Before a more in depth examination of *Othello*, the first of the four dramas in my literary trajectory, I would like to set the early modern stage, as it were, and explore how/what ideas of Africa(ness) were circulating in seventeenth-century England.³ Scholarship cites the composition date of *Othello* as 1604 in conjunction with its first recorded performance.⁴ This date sets the play on the cusp of a new century in Shakespeare's England, where an awareness of Africa and Africans was certainly present—if inaccurate. Queen Elizabeth (who died in 1602 and was succeeded in 1603 by James VI of Scotland) had, in 1601, made her well-known edict for the expulsion of black people from England:

Whereas the Queen's majesty, tendering the good and welfare of her own natural subjects, greatly distressed in these hard times of dearth, is highly discontented to understand the great numbers of Negroes and blackamoors which (as she is informed) are carried into this realm since the troubles between her highness and the King of Spain [author's emphasis]; who are fostered and powered here, to the great annoyance of her own liege people that which co[vet?] [sic] the relief which these people consume, as also for that the most of them are infidels having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel: hath given a special commandment that the said kind of people shall be with all speed avoided and discharged out of this her majesty's realms; and to that end and purpose hath appointed Casper van Senden, merchant of Lubeck, for their speedy transportation. (qtd. in Little 16)

This passage illustrates the overt racism (to use a term coined in the twentieth century) that was taking place during the early seventeenth century and the perception of black

³ Having addressed this very subject in a previous paper entitled *From Ògún to Othello: (Re)Acquainting Yoruba Myth and Shakespeare's Moor*, I have taken advantage of my earlier research and applied it here with minor revisions where necessary. This paper will build upon that work and allow me to revisit and re-examine the relevant sections.

⁴ The New Cambridge Edition of *Othello* explains the reasoning behind the date 1604: "The earliest evidence of the date of *Othello* is the record of a performance at court found in the Accounts of the Master of the Revels of the time, Edmund Tilney, for the year 1604" (I).

people (specifically Africans, since the edict precedes the global dispersal of black people via the slave trade) as intrusive non-Christians.

The edict names population, economy, and religion as primary (and seemingly valid) reasons for removing Africans (as objects) from England. It also plays upon the sympathy of the English as “natural subjects” and “liege people” who are losing their due “relief” to infidels and would stand to gain from the immediate expulsion of “these people.” As a result of its racial division, the edict produces the same series of binary oppositions that Elliot Butler-Evans sets up to establish Othello’s Otherness:

The articulation of explicit and implicit bodies of binary oppositions used to identify Othello—European/African, Christian/Moor, fair/dark, civilized/primitive—establishes the textual instance in which Moorishness and blackness are fused to complete a broader and more focused discourse of racial difference and Otherness. (145)

Shakespeare’s construction of the black character, Othello, three years after the edict, was likely informed by the African’s situation in and outside Elizabethan England.

Furthermore, Shakespeare’s awareness of the African’s situation could only be a result of the intercultural circulation of ideas regarding Africa and African-ness.

Beyond the actual “Negroes and blackamoors” in their midst, Elizabethans relied on literary accounts to inform their ideas about the black race. The *Longman Anthology of British Literature*, for instance, addresses this question of the perception and reception of *Othello* in its day:

What would Shakespeare’s audience have thought of the description of Othello as ‘the Moor’? Both the play itself and the literature on Africa that was available in English in the early modern period show that ‘Moor’ was a synonym for ‘Negro.’ Two kinds of accounts of the Moors and North Africans were available to Shakespeare’s audience: a kind of mythical travel literature inherited from such classical authors as Herodotus, Pliny, and Diodorus Siculus and more recent eyewitness accounts by seamen and traders who had traveled to Africa. While there were still many completely fantastical notions about non-European peoples

such as Moors, Africans, and Turks, Leo Africanus's *History of Africa* enlightened sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European and English audiences about the peoples and customs of Africa. (*Othello in Context* 1261)

This passage suggests that Shakespeare was informed by early modern ethnographic literature and asserts the implicit possibility that this awareness of Africans informed the playwright in his construction of *Othello*. The section notes the interchangeability of the terms "Moor" and "Negro," a comparison that is necessary for drawing parallels between Othello ("Moor") and Yoruba culture ("Negro" culture). The text also names mythical travel literature and eyewitness accounts as available literature on Moors. Othello's own narration of his travels reads as an eyewitness account and mimics the prejudicial ethnography that was being circulated at the time, complete with references to the budding slave trade and "fantastical notions about non-European peoples": "Of being taken by the insolent foe / And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence / And portance in my travel's history.../ And of the Cannibals that each other eat, / The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads / Grew beneath their shoulders" (*Othello* 1.3.136-44). Here, Shakespeare establishes a possible intertextual link between the play and the aforementioned *History of Africa* by Leo Africanus: "There are also people without heads, called Blemines, having their eyes and mouth in their breast" (qtd. in Jordan and Carroll 1264).⁵

"Africa(ness)" as a Western early modern trope is clearly equated with Otherness and inferiority. As Mythili Kaul stresses in her preface to *Othello: New Essays by Black Writers*: "In England, the color black was associated with sin, malignity, wickedness, and baseness....The sixteenth century thus, far from being innocent of what we would call

⁵ Andrew Hadfield draws attention to the significant fact that the English version of Africanus' influential text was published in 1600, only four years prior to the appearance of *Othello* (336).

racist ideology, was in historical terms its point of origin in Europe” (3-4). Having established the negative associations with Africa(ness) that possibly feed into *Othello*, I would now like to juxtapose those ideas with the culture of the Yoruba people living in Africa during Shakespeare’s time. Far from signifying an essence of “authentic” African-ness, the seventeenth-century Yoruba are one example of a prominent pre-colonial black people largely untouched by Western influences. As such, the Yoruba represent an archetypical alternative to the early modern trope of “Africa(ness)” portrayed in *Othello*. The trouble with juxtaposing Yoruba history alongside English history is that both were conceptualized by the same historians. As Elizabeth Isichei points out, “African history has been written either by westerners, or by Africans trained in western traditions” (21). This factor necessarily affects my attempt to place Yoruba culture in a historical context, because citations of Western discourse cannot be countered by recorded observations from the Yoruba perspective.⁶

Thus, my presentation of Yoruba history and its correlation to Shakespearean text unintentionally but necessarily becomes a product of Western discourse. A lack of literary records, however, does not mean a lack of records. In his study of Yoruba kingdoms, Robert Smith asserts, “The past of the Yoruba of West Africa...must be reconstructed, so far as the period preceding the penetration of their country by Europeans from about the mid-nineteenth century is concerned, almost wholly from tradition, or ‘oral evidence’ in the cumbersome phrase” (ix). Although there are discrepancies between “European sources and...indigenous traditions” (Law 47),

⁶ The Yoruba language remained unwritten until the 1840s although there was possibly a minor level of literacy in Arabic among select individuals of the northern Oyo people (Law 12).

scholarship and oral/archaeological evidence have produced at least a generalized notion of Yoruba pre-colonial history.

By the time *Othello* appeared in 1604, Yorubaland, which matched England in size, was an assemblage of established political kingdoms with distinct laws and recognized dynasties. The term “Yoruba” was originally a specific reference to the Oyo kingdom and did not become an umbrella term for the various kingdoms until the nineteenth century (Isichei 249). These independent kingdoms were hierarchical societies governed by an *oba* (“divine ruler”) and his chiefs. The kingdom usually had clear boundaries, a capital town, and even provinces, depending on its size. The principal occupations of the people were farming and crafts, although priests, soldiers, and slaves were all significant members of the kingdom’s infrastructure and both festivals and wars were common (Smith 109-119). Interaction with Europeans was limited to coastal trade but Robin Law’s historical study of the Oyo Empire notes that “during the seventeenth century, the Dutch, French, and English all established permanent trading stations in the Whydah area” (15). This rudimentary historical framework indicates a heterogeneous people who have since been homogeneously categorized according to language and “a body of shared religious concepts and socio-cultural patterns” (Isichei 249).

This basic examination of seventeenth-century Yoruba culture affords us a glimpse of the lives and traditions of a people living in the imagined space of Africa in the early modern period. We have also viewed Africa(ness) as an English invention that does not necessarily mirror the reality of presumed Africans like the Yoruba. Since *Othello* is the first Western dramatic text to portray African-ness, it is important to probe the implications of that portrayal. Does *Othello* primarily reflect the racist ideology of

Elizabethan times, or are traces of an ancient culture like the Yoruba evident in the play?

A brief study of the *Othello* play-text will help us identify its dominant tropes and determine how those tropes ultimately contributed to the play's representation of African-ness.

Perhaps the first trope of African-ness in Shakespeare's *Othello* is the physical representation of blackness. While that may sound obvious, I have already stated that African-ness and blackness do not necessarily go hand in hand, although they often did in the early modern period. Shakespeare chose to portray Othello, an African, as a man of "sooty bosom" (1.2.69) and "black visage" (3.3.384-5). This characterization of Othello in the play-text dispels any uncertainty regarding Othello's race. Of course there are numerous possibilities as far as how the character eventually appeared on stage and certainly Othello was played by white males in Shakespeare's time. That does not, however, alter the character's racial identity *within* the play. At this point, I would also like to address any potential concerns with my definition of Othello as an African. In his list of characters, Shakespeare describes Othello simply as "the Moor," not as "the African." However, given Othello's racial description as a black man, and the fact that black people in the seventeenth century originated primarily in the African continent, I find this sufficient indication of Othello's African-ness. As Walter Lim points out, "Early dabbings in the [slave] trade had brought African slaves to England from the 1570s onward...Black people constituted a recognizable presence in England when Shakespeare wrote *Othello*...[and] Blacks also found themselves inscribed mythically in texts, translated into terms that satisfied a popular craving for the exoticism that defined much travel literature of the period" (127). Of course, the term "Moor" itself is

particularly ambiguous, although I would suggest that in the case of Othello, “Moor” becomes interchangeable with “African” and “Negro.”

To argue this point further, I would like to return to Leo Africanus’ *History*, which was published and circulated in England around the same time that *Othello* first appeared. As an early modern authority on Africa, the *History* was also, as Kaul points out, “a work well known to Shakespeare and his contemporaries“ (2). In its general description, Africanus’ text divides the inhabitants of Africa into five groups: the Cafates, the Abaffins, the Egyptians, the Arabians, and the Moores:

Moreouer this part of the worlde is inhabited efpecially by fiue principall nations, to wit, by the people called Cafri or Cafates, that is to fay outlawes, or lawleffe, by the Abaffins, the Egyptians, the Arabians, and the Africans or Moores, properly fo called, *which laft are of two kinds, namely white or tawnie Moores, and Negros or black Moores* [author’s emphasis]. (6)

It is the last category of “Negros or black Moores” (the same category alluded to in Queen Elizabeth’s edict) to which Othello is ascribed. As I mentioned earlier, Shakespeare introduces Othello as “the Moor” and makes it clear that Othello is not a “white or tawnie Moore” but a “black Moore” by his references to the protagonist’s blackness. Othello is thus an “African,” a “black Moore,” and a “Negro” by virtue of the interchangeability of these terms as defined in Africanus’ text.

The definition of “Moor” has certainly been debated in light of the term’s equivocality. In his theoretical exploration of *Othello*, Elliott Butler-Evans states, “*Moor*, as a sign...was somewhat indeterminate for a seventeenth-century audience and would in all likelihood signify a generalized and vague exotica for general European and American audiences even today” (143). Hall asserts the same ambiguity of the sign in her study of blackness in England: “During the [early modern] period, the designation ‘Moor’ very

often stood alternatively for many of these categories [Muslims, Native Americans, Indians, white North Africans, and Jews], especially as it became a general term for the ethnically, culturally, and religiously ‘strange’” (7). Thus, “Moor” becomes an inclusive term applicable to racial and religious Others.

Nonetheless, the term can (and will for the purposes of this paper) be linked specifically to blackness and the black African. Butler-Evans goes on to note, “In *Othello* we see a specific racialization of the term, in which *Moor* signifies not only Otherness but blackness and the various negative associations culturally signified by blackness. Othello’s ‘thick lips,’ ‘sooty bosom,’ and so forth all become signs, or more significantly signemes, of his ‘Negroness’” (144). Similarly, Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin write, “Although ‘white Moors’ and Moors who have converted to Christianity abound in writings of the period, and although not all Muslims are seen as black, the association of blackness and Moorishness becomes increasingly pervasive” (13). Kaul indicates the eventual erasure of any ambiguity and states, “*Moor* came to mean almost exclusively a black moor, or a person of black or very swarthy color” (1-2).

Visible/physical blackness is thus a key element of Shakespeare’s representation of African-ness in *Othello*. Negative associations are certainly implicit in an early modern portrayal of blackness, but I will not revisit those associations, which I have already addressed in my sketch of Elizabethan England. Instead, I will argue that when viewed simply as an aspect of African-ness, Othello’s blackness can be read as a pragmatic attempt to reflect the reality of “African” people. After all, the Yoruba, a people that inhabited the African continent in the early modern period, are dark-skinned

black people who, in Shakespeare's time, would have been labeled as "Negros or black Moores," much like Othello.

Given the predominant role of Africans in Elizabethan England as slaves, indentured servants, and novelties, it is also worthwhile to note Othello's elevated status in white society. Certainly Othello's characterization as a black general who marries the white daughter of a prominent citizen makes for a great story, but could Shakespeare not also have chosen to depict his first African character as a minor, subservient figure more in keeping with the times? Although Othello is ultimately a tragic figure who is undermined by a white character (ironically, his own subordinate), he is also articulate, respected, and authoritative. Perhaps these traits are evident in numerous other Shakespearean characters, but they are significant in Othello because Othello is black. Whether it was Shakespeare's intention or not, Othello's characteristics are inevitably linked to his blackness and his African-ness.

Othello's position as a revered general (regardless of his conformation to "civilized" white Christian society) informs the ideas of African-ness represented in the play. While blackness was a natural association with African-ness in Elizabethan England, power was not, yet Shakespeare chose to link authority with African-ness by investing his African character with power. Kaul addresses this association of blackness and authority and presents it as a ploy on Shakespeare's part to make the black protagonist more palatable to a white, English audience:

In the seventeenth century, Othello's descent from 'men of royal siege'...would tend to make this outsider much more acceptable. In Britain, prejudice, as Mason observes, is much reduced for anyone who can establish that he or she belongs 'to the upper half of the class structure...And here is Shakespeare knowing his audience, using this native English snobbery...three and a half centuries ago.' (5)

Kaul's suggestion is logical in light of the English class structure and Shakespeare's need to invoke empathy and even esteem for his protagonist. While a black leader is still far-fetched in a white early modern setting, Othello's lineage and authoritative role (as they were recognized on stage) would have done much to win over an English crowd.

In the context of my argument, I posit another possible reason for Othello's characterization as a black leader, namely Shakespeare's awareness of "real" black leaders within the black communities of the African continent. My earlier sketch of seventeenth-century Yorubaland provided several examples of black "Africans" in positions of authority. From the *oba* down to his chiefs, priests, and warriors, each member of a Yoruba kingdom's hierarchy played a particular respected role. If Shakespeare read Africanus' *History*, he would have encountered Africanus' precise description of the prominent Yoruba kingdom of Benin and the divine status of its ruler:

Westward from the countries laft mentioned lyeth the kingdome of Benin, hauing a very proper town of that name, and an hauen called Gurte. The inhabitants liue in Idolatry, and are a rude and brutifh nation; *notwithstanding that their prince is ferued with fuch high reuerence, and neuer commeth in fight but with great folemny, & many ceremonies: at whofe death his chiefe fauorites count it the greateft point of honour to be buried with him, to the end (as they vainely imagine) they may doe him feruice in another world* [author's emphasis]. (42)

Benin is also the subject of the following excerpt from an English seaman's eyewitness account, published in 1555 in Peter Martyr's *Decades of the New World*. This description of the royal court of Benin is consistent with Africanus' account (which indicates some measure of accuracy) and could easily have served as a blueprint for Othello's character:

When they came they were brought with a great company to the presence of the king [of Benin], who being a black Moor (although not so black as the rest) sat in a great huge hall, long and wide, the walls made of earth without windows, the roof of thin boards, open in sundry places, like unto louers to let in the air. And

here to speak of the great reverence they give to their king being such that if we would give as much to our Saviour Jesus Christ, we should remove from our heads many plagues which we daily deserve for our contempt and impiety. (qtd. in *Othello in Context* 1263)

The passage describes a “black Moor” (previously defined as a Negro, an African, and in this context, a Yoruba) in a role of power and the adulation he receives from his court. Shakespeare’s *Othello* parallels this passage as a play about a black Moor who is also in a powerful role (that of general) and who is equally revered by the people of Venice and Cyprus as a valiant and noble leader. When summoned to the council chamber of the Venetian elders, Othello seems to hold court, much like the Yoruba king described above, as he retains the attention of all present with his tale of love: “Yet, by your gracious patience, / I will a round unvarnished tale deliver” (*Othello* 1.3. 89-90).

The staging of *Othello* is, therefore, notably similar to the description of the Moor in the passage. There is the clear possibility that Shakespeare’s knowledge of Africa, informed by such texts as Africanus’ *History* and Martyr’s *Decades of the New World* (whether at first or second-hand), was a key factor in the composition of *Othello*. The circulation of these texts and their representations of Africa-ness (through such signs as blackness and sovereignty) subsequently fed into Shakespeare’s literary construct of African-ness, a construct signified by such tropes as blackness and power.

While space and time prevent me from addressing Othello’s numerous other characteristics and further signs of African-ness, there is one last literary device that I would like to address, simply because it cannot be overlooked when considering the key elements that shape “African-ness” in *Othello*. I am referring here to the famous handkerchief that Othello gives Desdemona and the strong association between African-ness and the occult. I use the term “occult” as a blanket description for the more specific

concepts of fetishism, juju, and “black” magic. While early modern England had its own superstitions and beliefs regarding magic and sorcery, such concepts as fetishism and juju were tied specifically to Africa. The supernatural handkerchief and the story behind it are clearly connected to Othello’s African-ness and his roots in idolatry.

In order to clarify this argument, it is necessary to examine the concepts of fetishism and juju more thoroughly. Both of these terms are linked to West African religions and Yoruba beliefs in particular, and imply the investing of an inanimate object with magical power. E. Idowu notes in his study of Yoruba theology that, “according to the history of the word [fetish], it was first introduced by the Portuguese to describe the charms and sacred emblems of West Africa. The word signifies ‘that which is made’” (2). Idowu also addresses the historicity of the word “juju” as a possible derivative of the French term “jou-jou” meaning “toy” (2). Richard Dennett offers an alternative source for “juju” in the Yoruba phrase, Èsù Su, meaning “Little Devil” (192).⁷ And both Gascoigne Lumley and Robert Nassau, a missionary to West Africa in the nineteenth century, note the interchangeability of the two terms, fetish and juju. Lumley states, “The term ju-ju means the same as fetish...It is not a native African word, but is derived from the French *jeu*, a play” (vi) and Nassau writes:

‘Fetich’ is an English word of Portuguese origin. It is derived from *feitico*, ‘made,’ ‘artificial’ (compare the old English *fetys*, used by Chaucer); and this term, used of the charms and amulets worn in the Roman Catholic religion of the period, was applied by the Portuguese sailors...to the deities they saw worshipped by the Negroes of the West Coast of Africa....The native word on the Liberian coast is ‘gree-gree’; in the *Niger Delta*, ‘ju-ju’ [author’s emphasis]; in the Gabun country, ‘monda’; among the cannibal Fang, ‘bian’; and in other tribes the same respective dialectic by which we translate ‘medicine.’ (81)

⁷ Èsù, the dreaded *òrìsà* or god of life and death, is often paralleled with the biblical Satan or Devil.

In Yoruba religion, these reversible terms thus connote the endowed supernatural properties of a specific object. Shakespeare's text provides a critical example of a fetish or juju in the form of the handkerchief.⁸ The supernatural implications of the handkerchief go far beyond its ritualistic construction by a witch and its oral empowerment by a diviner, although these factors alone qualify it as fetish/juju and link it with traditional Yoruba religion.

The Egyptian (hence African) "charmer" who bestows the handkerchief on Othello's mother can "almost read the thoughts of people" (3.4.57-8) and articulates the power of her gift to seduce men or drive them away. This character forms an interesting double for the Yoruba diviner, an important member of Yoruba society who interprets myth and serves as a priest for the *òrìsà*s ("gods"). The process of divination and geomancy in Yoruba society involves the consultation of nuts, cowries, or shells and the recitation of verses. Systems of divination are numerous and highly complex; however, the role of the diviner is relatively consistent as the connection between the people and their deities:

The babalawo constitutes a focal point in the traditional Yoruba religion, channeling sacrifices and worshipers into different cults, recommending sacrifices to the dead or means of dealing with witches...and preparing protective and retaliatory 'medicines.' He helps his clients deal with the wide range of personalized and impersonal forces in which the Yoruba believe, and to achieve the individual destinies assigned to them at birth. (Bascom, *Ifa* 12)

Although Shakespeare does not elaborate on the circumstances of the meeting between the charmer and Othello's mother, there is the suggestion that she has approached the charmer as a client or suppliant who wishes to preserve her husband's fidelity. The charmer produces the handkerchief, which corresponds to the Yoruba diviner's

⁸ Lemuel Johnson presents the handkerchief as juju in his study of *Othello*: "Othello soon discovers that not even this *juju* of a handkerchief will do the trick where he now finds himself" (171).

preparation of magic or *ôgùn* (“medicine”). Like the diviner’s medicine, which is synonymous with juju, the charmer’s handkerchief has been ritualistically constructed:

There’s magic in the web of it. / A sibyl that had numbered in the world / The sun to course two hundred compasses, / In her prophetic fury sewed the work; / The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk, / And it was dyed in mummy which the skillful / Conserved of maidens’ hearts. (3.4.69-75)

The use of specific bodily fluids in the preparation of the handkerchief and its construction in “prophetic fury” directly parallels Nassau’s description of fetish-making:

A fetich, then, is any material object consecrated by the...magic doctor, with a variety of ceremonies and processes, by virtue of which some spirit becomes localized in that object, and subject to the will of the possessor. Anything that can be conveniently carried on the person may thus be consecrated,—a stone, chip, rag, string, or bead....There is a relation between these selected substances and the object to be obtained by the fetich which is to be prepared of them,—for example, to give the possessor bravery or strength, some part of a leopard or an elephant; to give cunning, some part of a gazelle; to give wisdom, some part of a human brain....In preparing a fetich the [magic doctor] selects substances such as he deems appropriate to the end in view,—the ashes of certain medicinal plants, pieces of calcined bones, gums, spices, resins, and even filth, portions of organs of the bodies of animals, and especially human beings (preferably eyes, brain, heart, and gall-bladder)....These are compounded in secret, with the accompaniment of drums, dancing, invocations, looking into mirrors or limpid water to see faces (human or spiritual, as may be desired).” (82)

Othello’s handkerchief qualifies as a consecrated “material object” and “can be conveniently carried on the person.” The handkerchief is also prepared with specific substances that are “appropriate to the end in view.” The sibyl’s choice of the fluids drained from embalmed maidens’ hearts is clearly linked to the handkerchief’s ability to keep maidens desirable for their husbands. The sibyl’s “prophetic fury” can likewise be linked to the “drums, dancing, [and] invocations” which Nassau describes above.⁹

⁹ The trope of the juju handkerchief is also a key element in Sears’ *Harlem Duet*.

The benevolent properties of the handkerchief are conditional upon its retention within Othello's family. Desdemona's consequent loss of the article (and its repossession by Iago) initiate the malevolence of which the charmer warns Othello's mother: "If she lost it / Or made a gift of it, my father's eye / Should hold her loathed, and his spirits should hunt / After new fancies" (3.4.60-63). Thus Othello, in fulfillment of the curse, begins to loath his wife and pursue the fancy of murdering her. James McPherson identifies the handkerchief as "of *great* symbolic significance to the play" (59) and posits it as a form of witchcraft, which Othello expressly denies using to woe Desdemona: "[Othello] refutes the charges against him, of witchcraft and betrayal of loyalty, by placing his story within a literary convention, or form, familiar to the Duke and his senators....But the 'rational' nature of his speech...causes Othello to omit any reference to the handkerchief he had given Desdemona" (58-9).

The mapping of Yoruba belief onto the handkerchief transforms it into a manifestation of witchcraft (juju and later voodoo in Sears' play), which comes in contact with several people and negatively affects them as a result of its mystical properties and origins. It is important to note that, in concurrence with the concept of juju, the handkerchief is not animate or dangerous in and of itself, but rather it operates through the actions of those who handle it: "The owner 'does not worship his fetich, but regards it as a little bit of property which cannot but be of service to him through its supernatural powers'" (Farrow 122).

Fetishism, though implicitly negative in a Western context (as a binary opposite to Christianity), is an aspect of traditional Yoruba religion. Shakespeare's unique representation of the handkerchief, when juxtaposed with the practice of juju in

Yorubland, proves his portrayal of occultism (and animism) to be relatively consistent with Yoruba theology. As such, the construct of Africa(ness) in *Othello* does not purely reflect the erroneous, racist view of Africa(ness) in early modern England, but rather, echoes, however distantly, aspects of a culture like the Yoruba. Othello's rejection of African culture (signified by his total embrace of European culture) and his prejudice against his own race remains a racist portrayal on Shakespeare's part: "Haply for I am black / And have not those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have" (3.3.262). The literary construct of Africa(ness) in *Othello*, signified by such tropes as blackness, power, and occultism, overlaps with comparable signs of "African-ness" documented in seventeenth-century Yoruba culture and counter-balances the racism in place in the construction of Othello as black Other. This establishes Africa as a legitimate (if not direct) influence on Shakespeare and allows for the possibility that documented Western encounters with coastal West Africa contributed to the first dramatic representation of African-ness in recorded history.

A Thin Line Between Shakespeare and Soyinka

With *Othello* as an early modern foundation for mapping the evolution of the literary trope of Africa(ness), I will now shift gears and make a temporal leap into the twentieth century. We have just examined how a seventeenth-century Western playwright went about the business of representing Africa(ness), and that not just any Western playwright, but *the* Western playwright—Shakespeare. But how have Shakespeare and his ideas of Africa(ness) affected contemporary global literature and dramatic representations of Africa(ness) that have come out of the imagined space that is Africa? In an effort to begin answering this question, I would like to turn to the next two

texts in my literary trajectory, Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame* and Ladipo's *Oba Waja*.

Before I do so, however, there is another, well known Yoruba dramatist from the same generation, Wole Soyinka, who requires mention here. I have purposefully chosen not to examine any of Soyinka's texts in this paper, despite the fact that he is arguably the most famous Yoruba playwright and his works are certainly relevant to this study of the literary trope of Africa(ness). Soyinka's works have been a focal point where research on African theatre and Yoruba tragedy is concerned. His dramatic texts, however, which have been repeatedly studied, would necessitate a comprehensive examination as a result of his tacit status as "Nigeria's leading dramatist" (Katrak 3). Instead of treading what I believe to be a well-worn path, I have chosen to examine two lesser known playwrights whose works are just as informative as Soyinka's and provide a broader spectrum of contemporary Yoruba plays. Without addressing his plays in any great detail, I would still like to discuss Soyinka as a prominent example of a controversial African writer whose works represent the precarious balance between Western literature and the highly scrutinized genre known as African literature.

On December 10, 1986, Soyinka received the Nobel Prize in Literature at the annual Nobel Banquet held in Stockholm. The Prize was awarded by a Swedish professor, Lars Gyllensten, who said the following in his presentation speech: "Dear Mr. Soyinka, In your versatile writings you have been able to synthesize a very rich heritage from your own country, ancient myths and old traditions, with literary legacies and traditions of European culture." Although Soyinka consciously draws on his Yoruba heritage in his texts and acknowledges the Yoruba god, Ògún, as his creative muse, his

works are all written in English and he has been openly criticized for mimicking Western poetic techniques. The three Nigerian authors of *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*, Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike, accuse the Nobel Laureate of being a euromodernist, “who [has] assiduously aped the practices of 20th-century European modernist poetry” (163). They further condemn his poetic language for being patterned after a sixteenth century British writer—none other than Shakespeare: “Wole Soyinka’s syntax and verbal structure is Shakespearean: he speaks of ‘unsexed,’ ‘such webs as these we build our dreams upon,’ and ‘Propitiation sped/Grimly on, before’...Partly as a result of this addiction to archaisms, the poetry...tends to be craggy, lumpy, full of obstructions, unnecessarily and artificially difficult” (165).

This criticism of Soyinka signifies the complex process of evaluating African literature and the recurrent debate surrounding the use of Western techniques and language(s). In his study, *Wole Soyinka and Modern Tragedy*, Ketu Katrak also points out the parallels between, for example, Soyinka’s tragedies and Shakespearean tragedies. While Katrak casts Shakespeare (and Western drama) as a progenitor, however, he does not make this a negative association:

Since Soyinka himself most clearly evokes the Greeks and Shakespeare, we can, for the purposes of discussing Yoruba tragedy, consider them as relevant predecessors for the Nigerian artist in his own philosophizing and dramatizing of tragic experience [author’s emphasis]. Soyinka, however, is always quick to point out where and how the Yoruba world-view differs radically from the Western one—differences which profoundly affect the kind of tragic drama which emerges from the two different world-views. Rather than entering the debate as to why it is necessary to evoke Western ghosts in a discussion of an African writer (a debate perhaps as boring as the never-failing question of why African writers use the English or French language), one simply finds that a discussion of Greek or Shakespearean tragedy is inevitable in a study of Soyinka’s Yoruba tragedy, since he is using a Western literary term, ‘tragedy,’ and a Western genre, ‘tragic drama.’ Needless to say, these Western models are not used to validate or to give credence to Soyinka’s own ideas. (33)

This defensive statement by Katrak responds to the criticism of Soyinka's use of the English language and his possible reliance on Western predecessors. Katrak makes it clear that contesting the use of colonial languages in favor of vernacular is pointless when dealing with African literature. He further indicates that when addressing the genre of "tragic drama," one cannot help discussing the archetypes of that genre, namely the Greek and Shakespearean tragedies. Katrak also denies the need for any Western archetypes to sanction Soyinka's texts, implying that Soyinka deviates sufficiently from those models and enforces his own original notions of tragedy. In response to that claim, however, I would identify the Nobel Prize as a very clear indication of Western validation and argue that Soyinka's receipt of the Prize was based on his incorporation of "literary legacies and traditions of European culture."

Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike heatedly argue against Western validation in their criticism of Soyinka and accuse him of relying on the support of a British following:

We acquiesced in the self-hobbling Soyinkaesque proposition that 'the less self-conscious the African is, and the more innately his individual qualities appear in this writing, the more seriously he will be taken as an artist of exciting dignity.' But Soyinka's audience appears to have never bothered to ask him a crucial question: taken seriously by whom? By Soyinka's British manipulators and promoters? If them, why should their opinion matter in Africa?

For these African writers, Soyinka's evocation or mimicry of anything Western is blatantly negative. Katrak, on the other hand, acknowledges the inevitability of Western influences and Soyinka's appropriation of those influences in his development of African theatre and Yoruba tragedy:

Soyinka described the purpose of [his] research: 'A considerable dramatic activity exists already [in Nigeria] but it is chiefly European in content and imitative in conception. What is needed...is a fusion of the two enthusiasms.' Having perceived 'West Africans' as 'groping madly for forms of theatre expression,' as

he states in the same letter, Soyinka himself has indeed fused the two traditions in his English-language theatre in Nigeria. (6-7)

It is not my purpose here to either acquit or condemn Wole Soyinka. I have presented divergent views of the dramatist to indicate the complexities of dealing with African literature as a result of such forces as colonialism and Eurocentrism. What needs to be stressed here is the admitted influence of Shakespeare, a leading Western playwright, on a leading Yoruba playwright like Soyinka. Although I will further examine the perception of Western influences on African literature as negative but/or simply inescapable, I will conclude my discussion of Soyinka with the recognition that Western, specifically Shakespearean tragedy, contributed to the shaping of contemporary African drama and consequent representations of African-ness in Yoruba tragedy.

The twentieth-century Yoruba plays are an integral part of the specific genealogy that I am proposing. As noted earlier, beginning in the seventeenth century, “Africa” and the traditions of a people within the imagined space of Africa (the Yoruba) fed into signs of Africa(ness) in early modern England as a result of trade encounters, ethnographic literature, eyewitness accounts, and the physical presence of “Africans” in England. Shakespeare mediated the reality of “Africans” in “Africa” and the racist Elizabethan construction of Africa(ness) to produce a hybrid form in *Othello* with pragmatic signs of “Africa” and racism active concurrently. Contemporary African theatre takes the notion of hybridity one step further and interculturally interpellates Shakespeare into the current space of Africa while simultaneously interpellating Yoruba-ness (contemporary African-ness) into the Shakespearean tradition.

Oedipus, Odewale, (Othello)

Like Soyinka, the late Ola Rotimi was born in the 1930s during Nigeria's colonial period and received a distinctly Western education. Rotimi attended primary school during the 1940s and secondary school during the 1950s, both decades when the number of (Western) schools and students in attendance in southern Nigeria were at a record high.¹⁰ James Coleman identifies Western education as "one of the most revolutionary influences operative in Nigeria since the beginning of the European intrusion" (113) and examines the content of that education between 1898 and the late 1950s.¹¹ Originally controlled and imposed by Christian missionary societies, Nigeria's educational system was undeniably Eurocentric:

With a few notable exceptions, education in Nigeria was based on learning to read, write, and calculate in the English language. Later additions to the curriculum were British Empire history and European geography.. *In literature, Shakespeare and the Bible held the stage. Even today, it is not uncommon to find a semieducated Nigerian working as a steward who can name the principal English critics, quote the Bible, and recite Hamlet, but who has little knowledge of the geography, the proverbs and folk tales, or the prominent leaders and outstanding events in the history of his own country.* (author's emphasis, Coleman 114-15)

In an interview conducted in 1973, Rotimi admits an exposure to Shakespeare when asked if there were any English playwrights who made an impression on him: "Yes, Shakespeare—his characterization through dialogue is nonpareil" (Lindfors 58).

Through the medium of Western education, Shakespeare clearly impacted the generation of dramatists and writers that came out of colonial Nigeria, fulfilling his role in my proposed genealogy as a precursor to contemporary African theater.

¹⁰ Coleman's *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism* charts the increased number of primary schools, secondary schools, and the rise in student attendance between 1906 and 1957 (134).

¹¹ Rotimi completed his Nigerian education in 1956 before leaving Nigeria in 1959 to pursue his Bachelor's at Boston University and later his Master's at Yale.

Around the time that Yoruba writers like Soyinka and Rotimi were beginning their literary careers, Yorubaland (within the boundaries of Nigeria) was literally English property.¹² The slave trade was the primary propellant behind Western intrusion and “in 1712 the British secured a virtual monopoly over slave dealing on the West Coast” (Coleman 40). Following the cession of the Yoruba port city of Lagos to the British Crown in 1861, the governor, Sir William Macgregor, managed to unite most of Yorubaland under the jurisdiction of the Lagos government and its British administration (Arikpo 31-33). British control over Yorubaland was finalized in 1900 when the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria was created.¹³

Colonialism would eventually affect not only the educational system of Nigeria but also the economies, languages, and cultures of the diverse people now labeled as Nigerians. I will however emphasize that while certain influences, such as a Eurocentric education, are unavoidable, the deliberate mimicry of Western practices (something that I accused Othello of earlier) on an African writer’s part, without (1) an original, creative purpose and/or (2) the acknowledgement of his/her own cultural traditions and history, becomes problematic. Western techniques, practices, and influences can be justifiably used by African writers as informative resources, familiar mediums, a means to reaching a greater audience, tools for parody or satire, and so forth. Obvious mimicry, on the other hand, is easily construed as an admission of Western superiority.

¹² Nigeria became independent in 1960.

¹³ Arikpo notes the eventual amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorates in 1914 to form Nigeria: “In November 1913 the Nigerian Protectorate Order-in-Council was issued to bring under one general government the territories hitherto known as the Colony and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria and the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria, and on New Year’s Day 1914 the new political entity known as the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria--NIGERIA for short--appeared on the world map, in the red shading of the British Empire (37).

For example, Katrak criticizes Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame*, as one of several "so-called African tragedies" that is modeled too closely on a Western original: "Although...Rotimi's adaptation...does convey the horror and suspense of the protagonist's fatal pursuit of self-knowledge, there is no successful transposition from the Greek to the African world except the most obvious, external changes of names and locations" (36). Katrak's contention is not with the use of English or the revision of a Western drama (both of which Soyinka has done), but rather with a lack of originality. He criticizes Rotimi's portrayal of Yoruba-ness ("African-ness") as clearly superficial, relying on a Greek worldview rather than a Yoruba one.

This charge of mimicry against Rotimi (and many African writers, including Soyinka) is the same charge leveled against Shakespeare's Othello, who conforms to an implicitly superior white society: "Othello suffers from an overwhelming inferiority complex, which is seen as a part of his racial heritage, his lack of social refinement, the absence in him of the fine balance of reason and emotion that comes with true 'education'" (Ogude 163). Rotimi thus parallels Othello as a (contemporary) black African accused of self-racism as a result of his approbation of English/Western practices. My concern here is whether Rotimi, as a genealogical successor to Shakespeare's eurocentric tradition, (unconsciously) promotes the same racist ideology employed by Shakespeare, despite a similar attempt at pragmatism.

Rotimi follows the story of Oedipus very closely in *The Gods*, substituting Oedipus for a Yoruba king named Odewale and tracing Sophocles' well-known tale from the protagonist's birth to his self-blinding and exile. Although he uses Yoruba names, places, proverbs, and deities, the "African-ness" of Rotimi's text might be read as an

inadequate veneer for not only a Western plot and characters, but also a Western mode of dramatic theatre.¹⁴ I argue, however, that while Rotimi clearly relies on Western practices and a specific Western drama, he fulfills my earlier conditions for that reliance, namely (1) an original, creative purpose and/or (2) the acknowledgement of his own cultural traditions and history. Rotimi's revision of Sophocles' text not only incorporates Yoruba cultural traditions and history, but also involves the original, creative purpose of making the ancient Greek story accessible to the everyday Nigerian and, furthermore, allegorically addressing the culturally relevant issue of tribalism. Although the allegorical content of the play is obscure and thus problematic, the playwright's intentions remain legitimate. Consequently, Rotimi's adaptation does not inane mimic Western drama and enforce the notion of white superiority propagated by Shakespeare (through Othello's aspirations to Western standards).

Katrak criticizes the play from a Western perspective where the play's transposition of *Oedipus Rex* is not carried far enough. But if, for example, *The Gods* is geared specifically towards a Yoruba audience that is generally unfamiliar with Sophocles' works, then the "Africanization" of the Greek play is sufficient. Michael Etherton discusses transpositions and adaptations in African drama and notes that the changes are usually made "to point to [the play's] relevance in the playwright's own society" (102). When viewed as a means of making *Oedipus Rex* comprehensible to Nigerians and Yoruba audiences in particular, Rotimi's play is satisfactory:

Partly because of the powerful structuring of the ironies of the original, Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame* has proved to be one of the most successful

¹⁴ Rotimi produces his plays "in the round," which might indicate the circular structure of Elizabethan theatres but is actually linked to the traditional stage of the village square, where the spectators sit around the performers (Obafemi 89).

modern plays in performance ever since its first production in 1968 by the playwright...in Ile-Ife, Nigeria. Most of the members of the audiences in West Africa would be ignorant of its Greek model and the Greek myth on which it is based...as such, his African audiences always receive it most enthusiastically. (Etherton 123)

There remain, however, a number of concerns about Rotimi's portrayal of Yoruba culture (namely his representation of such traditions as polygamy and kingship) that derive from African, specifically Yoruba critics.

These concerns are documented by Berth Lindfors in his 1973 interview with Rotimi. Lindfors, who "talk[ed] with a few Yorubas after seeing the play" (63), names two aspects of *The Gods* that members of the Yoruba audience found inaccurate or misrepresentative of their culture. Lindfors identifies the first so-called flaw in Rotimi's representation of Yoruba-ness as his characterization of the protagonist as a monogamist: "They said a man as important as King Odewale, the Oedipus figure in the play, would not have had only one wife" (63). This particular criticism is surprising because a reading of the play-text identifies a second wife, Abero, in the cast of characters, a fact that Rotimi is quick to point out in the interview: "They are overlooking the assumption that Abero, the maiden in Odewale's Court, is by custom being groomed by the Oloori, Queen Ojuola [Jocasta's double], to be a potential wife of the king" (63-4). Rotimi has thus integrated the Yoruba custom of polygamy into his play-text, although that inclusion seems to be lost on a viewing audience that has not actually read the play.

The second element that Yoruba viewers considered inauthentic was Odewale's ascension to the throne: "They said it would be very unlikely for a stranger, a foreigner, to become the leader of a town" (Lindfors 64). There is a notable parallel here between *The Gods* and *Othello*, since both plays explore the rise of a foreigner/Other to a position

of power. Earlier, I address Shakespeare's characterization of Othello (a black outsider) as the leader of a white city. Rotimi recreates that situation within an all black setting, and replaces racial difference with tribal difference. In response to criticisms regarding his characterization of Odewale as a foreign king, Rotimi accuses Yoruba critics of being too familiar with English history and not familiar enough with their own. His argument maligns Nigeria's Eurocentric education, instead of elevating it as paradigmatic (in keeping with Shakespearean tradition), and recalls Coleman's earlier description of the semi-educated Nigerian who can recite Hamlet but is ignorant of his own culture:

Let them read their history. And I don't mean English history, for I'm sure those same Nigerian critics know all about the battle of Hastings in 1066...But they'll be ignorant of the fact that assumption of kingship by a stranger of greater military or physical prowess was also quite a common experience in our own African mythology and history...African, and for that matter, world history abounds in kingship being decided upon the human incidence of "survival of the fittest" man! (Lindfors 64)

Rotimi cites a number of points in Yoruba history where a stranger assumes power, such as Oduduwa's subjugation of Ifè¹⁵ and Oranmiyan's ascension to the throne of Benin. Rotimi's argument is reinforced by Robert Smith's study of Yoruba kingdoms. Smith acknowledges that "many considerations determined the king-makers' choice of an *oba*, but a guiding principle was to select a ruler who would respect and conform to the constitutional conventions of the kingdom. This would usually be a man neither youthful nor elderly" (112). In *The Gods*, Odewale, a man of thirty-two years, finds the people of Kutuje kingless and persecuted by the neighboring city of Ikolu. Odewale unites the people and leads them to military victory over Ikolu, for which he is installed as the next king.

¹⁵ The demarcation between myth and history in Yorubaland is notably blurred but the origins of the Yoruba kingdoms are all consistently traced to the town of Ilé-Ifè or Ifè. Popular belief names Odùduwà (also called Odua) as the creator of the earth and the founder of Ifè.

Rotimi clearly attempts to signify accurate Yoruba customs and culture in his African version of *Oedipus Rex*. But his representation of such traditions as polygamy and a non-hereditary system for choosing an *oba* have either been overlooked (in the former case) or unjustly criticized as inaccurate (in the latter). Although Rotimi is able to argue against these minor criticisms of his portrayal of Yoruba culture, Michael Etherton identifies more thematic problems, which arise out of Rotimi's attempt to transpose a Greek worldview to a Yoruba one. Etherton declares a "lack of correlation between the Greek and Yoruba cosmogonies" (125) and criticizes Rotimi as "trapped both within the story and within the Greek moral order" (127).

There are a number of issues here that I would like to address in order to determine whether Rotimi's representation of Yoruba culture (and thus "African-ness") really falls short or not. Although Rotimi does not promote the racism found in Shakespeare's construction of African-ness, his portrayal of Yoruba-ness remains informed by Shakespeare's Eurocentric legacy. Just as *Othello* mediates a racist early modern perception of African-ness with a reality based on accurate accounts of "Africa," *The Gods* mediates the colonial ideal of Shakespearean/Western theatre with the reality of Yoruba culture and history. As such, Rotimi's text represents, like *Othello*, hybridity and reflects Yoruba -ness using Western drama, language, and technique as the vehicle for that reflection. Because it mediates Western drama with Yoruba ("African") culture, *The Gods* does not (as critics like Etherton assert) have to make a complete transition from a Western worldview to an African one. My argument addresses signs of "African-ness" that are imagined/constructed *as a result* of intercultural exchange and circulation, or as Kanneh aptly states, "the construction of Africa *across* and *between* disciplines" (1).

Although Etherton, like Katrak, feels that Rotimi has not made a successful transition from Greek (Western) thought to Yoruba thought, I argue that such an absolute transition is not necessary. As a play that draws on both Yoruba and Western theatrical practices and worldviews, *The Gods* does not, for example, have to replace Greek concepts like immutable fate or the tragic flaw with Yoruba cosmogony.

Etherton claims that while the primary theme of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* is the immutability of fate (predestination), that Greek concept only superficially resembles the Yoruba concept of fate:

Yorubas traditionally believe that your fate is your own doing...Furthermore, it is intrinsic to Yoruba cosmology that a person's fate is never irreversible...Finally, unlike the Greek Olympian pantheon...whose divinities pursue vendettas against each other and against mortals, the Yoruba gods are not capricious, least of all Ogun [Odewale's patron deity]. (124-25)

He thus determines that while Oedipus, a radical character, might have been punished with such a [negative] predestined fate in order to "determine his own moral responsibility" (125) and resolve the conflicting moral claims of the Greek gods, Odewale, as a noble character of moral integrity, would not "have been given such a specifically criminal and heinous fate" (125) according to the Yoruba worldview (such as one may be said to exist).

Rotimi acknowledges in his interview with Lindfors that the concept of predestination is a possible parallel between the Greek and Yoruba worldviews, but also admits (in agreement with Etherton) that the connection is a loose one:

Traditional Nigerian religions...do acknowledge the power of predestination. Furthermore, our religions appreciate the wisdom in personal submission...not only to the gods of the land but also to the memory of departed ancestors...But the similarities seem to end there. A salient difference arises between the Greek original of the Oedipus saga and my African treatment of the same story. (62-3)

Rotimi's solution to the problem of divergent cultural worldviews is to institute aspects of both the Greek and the Yoruba cosmogonies. Instead of signifying the Greek notion of immutable fate, which still qualifies as a valid African theological concept, Rotimi's drama represents autonomy, which Etherton identifies as the traditional Yoruba concept of fate.¹⁶ Rotimi's title alone points towards an exoneration of fate and the gods and the protagonist refutes the notion of the gods as the controllers of fate: "No, no! Do not blame the Gods. Let no one blame the powers...The powers would have failed if I did not let them use me. They knew my weakness: the weakness of a man easily moved to the defence of his tribe against other" (71).

Here Rotimi introduces the useful Western concept of hamartia, the tragic flaw, to counter predestination and explain the protagonist's unique fate: "The human element of Oedipus' tragic flaw in the Greek original is irascibility...On the other hand, in the case of Odewale...the human element of the tragic flaw is tribal bigotry" (Lindfors 63). *The Gods* thus blends the notion of autonomy with the Greek/Western concept of hamartia,¹⁷ an interpretation derived from Aristotle's analysis of *Oedipus Rex*: "This interpretation finds a single 'fault' in the character of Oedipus which overrides all his other virtues and causes his "downfall" (Etherton 125). By integrating Aristotle's popular and widely

¹⁶ Etherton states that "it is intrinsic to Yoruba cosmology that a person's fate is never irreversible," and it is this notion of self-determination that Rotimi represents in his play. However, the concept of predestination is also an integral part of traditional Yoruba belief. B.M. Ibitokun begins his study of African drama and the Yoruba world-view with the following epigraph: "Ayànmó ò gbòògùn (Destiny has no cure)." Ibitokun explains his epigraph as "a Yoruba proverb which expresses the idea that the course of destiny *cannot* [author's emphasis] be altered" (19). In a later chapter of his text, Ibitokun describes the traditional African world-view as deterministic and notes that "characters drawn from that cosmology are fate and god-ridden" (57). He further identifies *The Gods* as an example of that deterministic worldview.

¹⁷ Although hamartia is a Greek/Western concept, especially when linked to the Oedipus saga, there is a similar notion of an unalterable physical or mental flaw in Yoruba theology: "The Yoruba thought in this respect is that Orisha, the Maker, creates human beings in two stages. First, he moulds the heads and keeps them in a dark store. The heads are of various kinds—thief's head, sufferer's head, king's head, abiku's head, etc. He then makes the trunks and enjoins each of them to go to the store and pick a head. Once this choice is made it is irrevocable" (Ogunba qtd. in Katrak 114-115).

taught interpretation, Rotimi maintains a key thematic element of the Oedipus saga while still altering the story enough to fit an aspect of Yoruba theology (autonomy).

Ultimately, it is not Rotimi's incorporation of the tragic flaw motif, but rather his identification of that flaw as tribal bigotry that complicates his drama. Tribal bigotry (while highly relevant to Nigeria's civil war) is out of place in Rotimi's adaptation of *Oedipus Rex*, which addresses the downfall of an individual rather than a people or a nation.

In the previously-mentioned 1973 interview, Rotimi reveals that his purpose is not only to make the Greek tragedy accessible to Nigerian audiences, but to comment on Nigeria's political situation and the recent civil war: "The title really has more to it than meets the eye. [It] does not refer to the mythological gods...Rather it alludes to national, political powers such as America, Russia, France, England, etc...The title implies that these political 'gods' shouldn't be blamed or held responsible for our own national failings" (61). Rotimi's presentation of "tribal distrust as the hero's major tragic flaw" (62) is thus intended to correlate to the internal strife of Nigeria¹⁸:

Indeed, all the ridiculous facets of tribal bigotry are exposed in the end of the play when the hero realizes that the man he killed in defense of his tribe was his very own father; the land he has long suspected of plotting against him for reasons of ethnic difference is, in fact, his own motherland. (Lindfors 63)

In light of this reading, it becomes even clearer that Rotimi's drama is about culpability, specifically self-blame as opposed to predestination. The difficulty lies in the apparent allegorical intent of the play, an intent that is too obscure to be informative. In

¹⁸ *The Gods* was first performed at Ifè in 1968, during the Nigerian Civil War (also known as the Biafran War). As Umoren notes in his text, *Democracy and Ethnic Diversity in Nigeria*, the Republic of Biafra was created in 1967, separating Eastern Nigeria from the rest of the country. The ensuing war lasted until 1972: "At the end of the Civil War, Nigeria was left as fragile as ever socio-politically...The problem has existed because using natural resources as bait, many ethnic groups have demanded their autonomy in order to control these resources" (105).

addressing tribalism through the story of *Oedipus Rex*, Rotimi restricts himself by virtue of closely adapting Sophocles' (Western) text and relying on the tradition of that text. The hybridity of *The Gods*, although important in the construction of African-ness between cultural discourses, undermines Rotimi's creative purpose of commenting on the Nigerian civil war.

The significance of tribalism is lost in the play because of the emphasis on the protagonist's temper, indicating that trait to be the tragic flaw (in keeping with the original tragedy), rather than ethnic prejudices. Etherton understandably assumes hot-temperedness to be the protagonist's hamartia, contrary to Rotimi's claim of tribal bigotry: "Rotimi retains the notion of the tragic flaw, but specifically substitutes hot-temperedness for pride. Odewale's flaring temper is constantly commented upon" (126). Etherton ultimately condemns Rotimi's suggestion of allegory as openly lacking:

What is seen at the end of the play is the tragedy of one man, not of Kutuje or of the Yoruba kingdom; and the [Nigerian] civil war was fought on a regional basis in which the Yoruba role itself was not clearly defined. There are many tangled issues caught up in the war, and to reduce it to a single cause is trite. Finally, there are no other correlations in the play for the civil war; and there is the problem of the actual thrust of meaning of the original Greek story. (127)

Rotimi's adaptation represents the historical traditions of the Yoruba people while simultaneously commenting on the situation of modern Nigeria. Through the techniques and irony of an ancient Western drama, Rotimi manages to allude to the tribalism that is a prominent part of the heterogeneous concept of "African-ness." Because of the allegorical intent and the appropriation of Western practices *in order to* comment on Yoruba culture and ethnic prejudices within Nigeria, Rotimi's play is not, as Katrak implies, pure mimicry. While the allegory remains buried and thus lost in Sophocles'

plot, Rotimi's portrayal of Yoruba culture (using Western drama as a medium) is historically accurate, comprehensible, and generally appreciated by African audiences.¹⁹

The construct of African-ness in *The Gods* overlaps with the tropes of African-ness in *Othello* (signified by such signs as blackness, power, and occultism). These tropes are also evident in seventeenth-century Yorubaland, indicating the preservation and perpetuation of specific ideas of African-ness. The overlap of signs reflects not only European encounters with West Africa in the early modern period, but also the influences of colonialism and the application or resistance of Western thought in the development of African literature.

Njé o gbó Yorùbá?

As part of my proposed genealogy, these Yoruba plays (which have come out of colonial Nigeria) illustrate how Shakespeare and Western drama have been interpellated into the "African" playwright's experience. Although the late Duro Ladipo, like Soyinka and Rotimi, was also born in the 1930s, educated in Nigeria's colonial period, and exposed to Shakespeare,²⁰ his works differ significantly from the other playwrights in terms of style and language. The first key element of Ladipo's texts is that they are written in Yoruba. Despite my earlier admission that African literature written in colonial languages is legitimate (given Africa's colonial history and the use of European languages as a unifying, albeit Westernizing factor), the use of an indigenous African language unquestionably heightens the African writer's representation of "African-ness."

¹⁹ Further analysis of Rotimi's plays by Nigerian critics is found in Obafemi's *Contemporary Nigerian Theatre: Cultural Heritage and Social Vision*.

²⁰ Ladipo was born to Christian parents in 1932. Soyinka, born in 1934, was the child of Christian converts and his father was the headmaster of the local missionary school (Katrak 4). Rotimi was born in 1939 to an educated father (his mother was not literate) who worked as an engineer and adapted and produced plays in his leisure time (Lindfors 59).

Although Katrak finds the debate surrounding the African writer's use of the English or French languages boring, the question of language remains important for this examination of African plays and the literary construct of African-ness. As Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike point out, "Works done for African audiences, by Africans, and in African languages, whether these works are oral or written, constitute the historically indisputable core of African literature" (11-12).

Through a Yoruba-language play like *Oba Waja*, Ladipo puts a different spin on the concept of African-ness. While colonial languages and African literature written in those languages represent a valid aspect of recent African history, Yoruba-language plays delve even further into pre-colonial history to produce drama that is closer to an ancient idea of Yoruba-ness/"African-ness" (as might be signified by seventeenth-century Yoruba culture). Ladipo writes in the traditional style of the Yoruba folk opera, as opposed to the more Western(ized) forms of tragedy employed by Soyinka or Rotimi.²¹ Ladipo's adherence to the Yoruba language, history, and traditional theatre is significant, given his exposure to the same Western influences as his contemporaries and the task of mediating a Christian/English education and upbringing with the traditional beliefs and culture of his Yoruba ancestors. Like the English-language Yoruba plays, however, a "dual heritage" led to the evolution of the Yoruba operatic theatre as another hybrid form: "The works of the practitioners of this theatre are both products of the colonial experience (through education and the christian religion), and the practitioners' cultural background" (Obafemi 13).

²¹ Despite the use of vernacular and such traditional devices as drumming and dance, Yoruba operatic theatre has still evolved from such Western influences as the Christian cantata (Obafemi 13).

In his tribute to Ladipo, Tunde Okoli writes that the playwright “took early interest in scriptures and drama” and even organized a production of Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* while working in the northern Nigerian city of Kaduna. But Ladipo’s eventual role would be as a prominent writer of historical Yoruba folk operas and the leader of a Yoruba traveling theatre. Karin Barber briefly outlines the history of the folk opera in her article on Yoruba popular theatre: “Yoruba popular theatre became a well-established form in the 1940s and 50s. Its starting point was in the church, where choirmasters and choirs collaborated to produce ‘Bible operas’” (8). Olu Obafemi notes “the three main constituents of oral performance [as] oral literature (poetry and folktales), music and dance” (14) and identifies other key elements of the folk opera: “The Yoruba (operatic) theatre, apart from its use of music and dance for rhythm and meaning, include[s]...heavy reliance on improvisation and an active involvement of the audience in the process of performance” (16). In this examination of tropes of African-ness, Yoruba popular theatre (signified here by Ladipo’s play) is a critical referent for representations of Yoruba-ness. As Biodun Jeyifo aptly explains, “It is not merely the case that the theatre is overwhelmingly a Yoruba-language theatre, it is also deeply steeped in the folklore, traditional moral codes, and pre-industrial, precapitalist animist-pantheistic sensibilities of pristine Yoruba culture” (115).

Ladipo’s tragic folk opera, *Oba Waja*, is one of three historical plays centered on the ancient Yoruba city of Oyo. I must acknowledge that I am working from the English translation of this play, which turns it into an adaptation and troubles the significance of the original Yoruba text and the possibilities of working with that text. Even in translation, however, Ladipo’s operatic theatre represents a compelling aspect of African

ness through its portrayal of Yoruba history and culture.²² In his article on African drama and theatre, J. C. de Graft also admits the value of the translated folk opera: “Nigerian Folk Opera was, from the start, quite solidly based in Nigerian (Yoruba) folk life, mythology, legend, music, dance, and poetry—as may be seen even in the English translations/adaptations that have come out in published form” (16). And Etherton recognizes that “someone who is forced to use a translation...will prefer to work from a prosaic but accurate version by the translator” (139-49). I argue that Ulli Beier’s translation of Ladipo’s drama is such a version and Beier candidly admits the possible limitations:

The language of these plays is derived from ancient ritual Yoruba poetry, but Duro Ladipo has greatly developed and adapted the ancient imagery for his purposes. It is this ancient imagery of the Yoruba language which the translation has tried to convey. Yoruba is so musical, that no European language could attempt to capture its rhythm and melody. (Ladipo 74)

Oba Waja, set in Oyo in the mid-twentieth century, revolves around the death of a king or *oba*. After the *oba*’s death, the commander of his horse, Ojurongbe Aremu, must voluntarily commit suicide in order to accompany the *oba* on his journey to the afterlife. This ancient custom, which Leo Africanus documents in his early modern text,²³ is interrupted by the British District Officer of the city. Acting on his wife’s advice, the District Officer prevents the suicide by arresting the intended victim. The dramatic irony of the story plays out as Ojurongbe’s son, Dawudu, returns home and learns of his father’s shameful neglect of his duty. In order to fulfill tradition, Dawudu commits

²² Ladipo worked closely with the translator of his works, the German professor, Ulli Beier, unlike, for example, Leo Africanus, whose original Arabic and Italian manuscripts were altered, translated, and published independently of him.

²³ “Their prince is ferued with fuch high reuerence, and neuer commeth in fight but with great folemny, & many ceremonies: at whofe death his chiefe fauorites count it the greateft point of honour to be buried with him, to the end (as they vainely imagine) they may doe him feruice in another world” (42).

suicide in his father's place. Ojurongbe, in his grief, also kills himself, leaving a guilty District Officer and the resigned Oyo people to ponder the tragedy.²⁴

Like *Othello* and *The Gods*, *Oba Waja* (re)creates the tragic downfall of a black African protagonist. Unlike the previous plays, however, the protagonist is neither a leader nor a king. Obafemi stresses this point when comparing the play to other tragedies: "While *Oedipus Rex* is a tragedy of character, *Oba Waja* is not. It is not appropriate to refer to either Ojurongbe or Dawudu as the tragic hero in the drama. A drama such as *Oba Waja*, centred not on heroism but on social order, does not require a tragic hero" (19). Like *The Gods*, Ladipo's text is informed by Yoruba history and mythology, and represents Yoruba culture through the actions of the characters. Just as Rotimi incorporates such documented aspects of Yoruba culture as polygamy, Ladipo examines the Oyo custom of sacrificing the *olori elesin* ("commander of the king's horse") upon the death of the *oba*.

The same signs of African-ness portrayed in Shakespeare's *Othello* and later documented in Rotimi's *The Gods*, are once again identified in *Oba Waja*. While the tropes of blackness and power are not remarkable in historical Yoruba plays, occultism (specifically fetishism/juju) as a consistent sign of African-ness in all three plays is worth noting. Shakespeare's portrayal of fetishism/juju and both Rotimi and Ladipo's representations of juju centuries later indicate not only the preservation of that concept in West Africa, but also the global diffusion of that concept and its significance in specific dramatic representations of African-ness. A study of the Yoruba plays alone proves juju to be an integral part of Yoruba culture and the performance of African-ness.

²⁴ This particular story is also the subject of Soyinka's drama, *Death and the King's Horseman*.

The most notable scene of *The Gods* involving juju is Odewale's confrontation and murder of the Old Man (later revealed as his father). When the Old Man and his followers attempt to steal Odewale's farm, he "pulls out his tortoiseshell talisman pendant, holds it towards his assailants, and mesmerizes them" (47). Odewale's chant, "Close, close in sleep, close in sleep" (47) is not unlike Iago's incantation as he puts Othello into a trance: "Work on, My medicine, work!" (4.1.42). Ladipo also presents juju as a sign of African-ness in his drama, but further juxtaposes that traditional Yoruba practice with European influence/intrusion: "My charms were rendered impotent by the European; my medicines have gone stale in their calabash" (63).

White presence and its ability to render black supernatural power useless²⁵ is an interesting foil (and, paradoxically, a defining characteristic) to dramatic representations of African-ness. In *Othello*, African-ness is clearly equated with Otherness, while in *Oba Waja* it is the British District Officer and his wife that become Other in a black/Yoruba/African world. It is somewhat ironic that Ladipo should choose to incorporate Western characters into a Yoruba-language play performed primarily in traditional Yoruba settings, while Rotimi's English-language play, which caters to a more Westernized audience, does not include *any* Western characters. Furthermore, Ladipo characterizes whiteness in order to criticize European interference, while Rotimi, through his attempted allegory, absolves the Western "gods" of any blame for Nigeria's political crisis.

Although Ladipo's play is based on a true story and the actions of an actual District Officer (who was contacted through an acquaintance of Ladipo and verified the story), Ladipo's characterization of whiteness and British-ness is carefully constructed.

²⁵ Sears also addresses the power of whiteness to nullify "black" magic in *Harlem Duet* (102).

Just as Shakespeare relied on circulating ideas of African-ness along with his own opinions and experiences to portray Othello, Ladipo now reverses the situation and draws on general perceptions, documented encounters, and first-hand knowledge to signify European-ness/whiteness.

The play opens with the D. O. and his wife looking out of their bedroom window at dancers and drummers in the moonlight. In keeping with Yoruba custom, the Oyo people are “celebrating” the death of their *oba*, but their actions are viewed through a racist white gaze: “For God’s sake, John! Can’t you stop this noise? Can these people never keep quiet?” (56).²⁶ To his wife’s query, the patronizing D. O. replies, “I am sorry, Jane. These people are burying their king. There is nothing I can do about it” (56). Ladipo’s obvious choice of John and Jane as common British names is comical and parodic. Through the white gaze, Ladipo re-establishes the same series of binary opposites (European/African, Christian/Moor, fair/dark, civilized/primitive) that Butler-Evans identified in his discussion of Othello: “Do you mean to say that in the twentieth century we still have human sacrifices in this town—and under British rule?...Are you not here to bring civilization to this people?” (57). In keeping with the racist ideology of Elizabethan (and twentieth-century imperialist) England, whiteness and British-ness are, according to the white characters in the play, equivalent to civilization. Western-ness is thus represented by such negative signs as ignorance, racism, interference, and patronization, signs that are linked to the binary opposites of African-ness—English(Yoruba), white(black), Christian(pantheistic), and colonizer(colonized). Ladipo manages to apply the (negative) association of Other to his British characters and offer

²⁶ The D. O.’s wife uses the same description of “these people” that Queen Elizabeth used in her 1601 edict to refer to black people.

his audience the racist perspective of those characters without disclaiming any Yoruba traditions or beliefs.

So far as African-ness is concerned, however, Ladipo's portrayal of Yoruba beliefs clearly signifies specific "African" notions of existence, balance and continuity: "Continuity is an essential concept in the African cosmology" (Obafemi 30). Ladipo's representation of the *oba*'s death and the Yoruba funeral process is one significant aspect of Yoruba traditional beliefs that shapes the dramatic construct of African-ness. In the opening act of the play, the D. O.'s wife comments on the lengthy Yoruba process of burying an *oba*: "Burying their king?...I thought they'd buried him last week! Can these fellows never stop celebrating?" (56). The seemingly endless "celebration," however, mirrors the necessary rites for not only a king, but any elder Yoruba who dies of old age.

As Ibitokun explains, the Yoruba concept of death does not involve "the annihilation of being" (21), but rather, it is the attainment of another metaphysical world:

It is simply a rite of passage, a transition from human to divine essence....The Yorùbá world-view is multidimensional. It is not restrained to the physical, tangible plane of existence. Besides the earth which is the measure of the present, and the locus of mortals and where you and I, in the form of existence, dramatize our distinctive destinies, there are the realms of ancestors (the past), gods (the eternal) and the unborn (the future). The ancestral world belongs to the 'òkú-òrun' (the departed) who, having attained the age of maturity and adolescence, pass away. (Ibitokun 21-22)

The smooth transition of the deceased, however, often depends upon the fulfillment of certain traditions: "In Yorùbáland, as in much of Africa, the spirit world of the ancestors and the gods is accessed through special rituals. There seems to be a clear danger inherent in crossing into the spirit world without proper preparation through ritual" (Quayson 105). In *Oba Waja*, the king cannot enter the ancestral realm without the accompaniment of the *olori elesin*: "How the king is hungry. He is wandering in the

dark. He cannot face the gate of heaven alone” (Ladipo 64). The natural order of things is thus disrupted: “Tragedy strikes, the Yoruba ‘cosmic totality’ sways when the soul refuses to go on in its ultimate journey” (25).

Ultimately, *Oba Waja* is, as Obafemi notes, a play about social order and, in accordance with the Yoruba worldview, the restoration of that order. The unfortunate Ojurongbe, who is initially arrested and then later unwilling to fulfill his duty, is eventually condemned by the wandering spirit of the dead *oba*, but Ojurongbe’s son, Dawudu, is able to restore the line of continuity: “It is in the effort to make reparation for his lineage...that Dawudu...returns from Ghana to go through ritual death. Harmony is restored and the link in peaceful coexistence between the metaphysics of the Oyo People and their concrete life is ensured” (Obafemi 33-4).

Ladipo’s *Oba Waja* and Rotimi’s *The Gods* provide useful examples of two primary genres in contemporary Yoruba drama, the popular theatre tradition and the literary theatre in English. Obafemi points out that “both the theatre of the operatic mode and [the] literary dramas draw from the common backcloth of the traditional theatrical performances” (67), but each genre represents different aspects of Yoruba-ness (hence “African-ness”). While Ladipo is “more interested in projecting a community sense and spirit” (Obafemi 67), which is the general objective of Yoruba tragedy (Katrak 19), Rotimi and other intellectual dramatists (like Soyinka) “make conscious creative efforts to plumb the psychological depths of their dramatic protagonists” (67), in keeping with the tragic dramas of Western predecessors like Shakespeare or Sophocles.

Oba Waja, as a folk opera, represents a purer form of “African-ness” in terms of performing the Yoruba language, history, and mythology in a traditional African setting.

As a Yoruba-language play with culturally specific proverbs and poetry, *Oba Waja* clearly targets a Yoruba audience and does not necessarily cater to a wider, non-African or even Westernized audience. *The Gods*, on the other hand, while compromising its portrayal of Yoruba-ness (“African-ness”) through its use of English and Western techniques, does manage to reach a greater African/Western audience and circulate ideas of African-ness. Obafemi identifies Rotimi as one of the “closest dramatists in English to the traditional performing arts in Nigeria both in terms of the use of oral tradition and history” (89). He further notes that “the success of [Rotimi’s] enterprise can easily be ascertained, beyond the literary text, by his remarkable popularity among Nigerian audiences” (117). Both plays mediate issues of intercultural exchange, thus informing this examination of African-ness, not only as a trope constructed across literary disciplines, but as a trope that is re-distributed via performances in “African” and “Western” settings.

These twentieth-century Yoruba plays illustrate contemporary dramatic representations of African-ness from the African perspective and the influence of Shakespeare and Western drama on Yoruba theatre. Both Ladipo and Rotimi studied or acknowledged an exposure to Shakespeare as a result of their Western educations and both consciously use Western drama as a resource for their respective works. Rotimi incorporates Western theatrical practices into his text through adaptation and English usage, while Ladipo draws on Western/Christian operatic music. The modes of popular theatre and literary dramas developed in Yorubaland signify “a fusion of western dramatic models and the traditional African dramatic heritage” (Obafemi 67). The signs of African-ness in *The Gods* and *Oba Waja* (which correspond to the historical “African-

ness” of the seventeenth-century Yoruba, indicating a maintenance of that culture) also correlate to specific tropes of African-ness in *Othello*. This correlation allows for the possibility of a unique intercultural exchange of ideas in which aspects of seventeenth-century Yoruba (“African”) culture fed into an early modern representation of African-ness like *Othello* via eyewitness accounts of Yoruba (“African”) people and customs.

Those documented aspects of Yoruba culture were also maintained and handed down in Yorubaland (“Africa”) through the process of orality and tradition. In turn, the early modern representation of African-ness in *Othello* (which was already potentially informed by Yoruba culture) was then *possibly* infused back into Yoruba culture through the inclusion of Shakespeare in the curriculum of colonial Nigerian schools for the first half of the twentieth century. And we have already documented the *reality* that Shakespeare’s works influenced the two Yoruba playwrights that I have examined. Ultimately, I have highlighted commonly circulating signs of African-ness in seventeenth-century Yoruba culture, the early modern English drama of *Othello* and two contemporary Yoruba dramas, *The Gods are Not to Blame* and *Oba Waja*. The notion that this commonality is the result of a very specific cultural exchange and the circulation of very precise ideas of African-ness as manifested in these three texts is, I would like to think, possible, if not yet probable.

Harlem Renaissance

I have attempted to map out a very specific literary trajectory starting with the original 1604 *Othello* and the signs of African-ness in that play. I have further attempted to determine the ongoing influence of *Othello* and Shakespeare in a contemporary setting, specifically with regards to dramatic representations of “Africa-ness” in a culture like the

Yoruba. My study of *The Gods* and *Oba Waja* has helped to map one aspect of the literary evolution I have proposed and correlate signs of African-ness in the early modern period with signs of African-ness in the twentieth century. I have not yet, however, addressed the wider global stage and a relevant drama that has come out of a non-European and non-African setting, but informs this examination of *Othello*, Shakespeare, and, most importantly, the literary construct of African-ness. Djanet Sears' *Harlem Duet* is a relevant Canadian drama that can broaden ideas of intercultural encounters/exchanges, the circulation of specific ideas of African-ness, and the legacy of the widely disseminated Western tradition that is Shakespeare.

Harlem Duet is a startling revision of *Othello* that constructs African-ness between continents (North America/Europe/Africa), cultures (African/Canadian/American), races (black/white) and dramatic traditions (Shakespeare/black Canadian theatre). In my earlier discussion of Rotimi's adaptation, I quoted Etherton as stating, "In reworking play-texts...changes are made in order to point to its relevance in the playwright's own society" (102). Etherton's claim remains true for Sears' adaptation, which reflects aspects of her own heritage as an African-Canadian woman. Joanne Tompkins further identifies Sears' adaptation as an attempt to shift the burden of an imposed Western literary legacy:

[P]ost-colonial revisions of Shakespeare's plays displace an inherited tradition in order to accommodate other cultural traditions that...have developed in quite different social, literary, and political directions...[these texts] ascribe agency to that which is not Shakespeare to dismantle Shakespeare's canonical and institutional power in countries where different historical and cultural contexts now operate. (qtd. in Dickinson 188)

By (re)writing *Othello* with an all-black setting and an all-black cast, and further instituting a black female as the tragic hero/protagonist, Sears completely realigns the

focus of the play and makes Shakespeare's text and the tradition of that text specifically relevant to her own cultural situation. Set in the city of Harlem, the play covers three different time frames: 1928, the present (at the corner of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X boulevards) and 1860. As Sears explains in the foreword to her play, "*Harlem Duet*, a rhapsodic blues tragedy, explores the effects of race and sex on the lives of people of African descent. It is a tale of love. A tale of Othello and his first wife, Billie" (Sears 14-15).

Sears' decision to write "a non chronologically itinerant prequel" (*Testifyin'* iii) to *Othello* addresses the black character's former African identity, or in this case, his African-American identity in a black community. Because she is a black playwright, Sears acknowledges a compulsion on her part to respond to the white Shakespeare's characterization of blackness and African-ness: "As a veteran theatre practitioner of African Descent, Shakespeare's *Othello* had haunted me since I first was introduced to him...Othello is the first African portrayed in the annals of western dramatic literature. In an effort to exorcise this ghost, I have written *Harlem Duet*" (14).

While Sears, like Rotimi, for example, transposes a (white) Western drama to another (black) cultural setting, in this case the "symbolic heart (Harlem) of American black culture" (Fischlin and Fortier 286), that transposition is more complex when the original Western drama has already attempted to represent blackness. Having touched upon the original *Othello* and Shakespeare's (white, early modern) representation of African-ness/blackness, we can now examine how a contemporary black female playwright deals with that same black character and the construct of Africa-ness through

the experiences of a black female protagonist: “This is Billie’s story. The exorcism begins” (Sears 14).

There are several aspects of *Harlem Duet* that are particularly compelling within the context of what I am arguing. Beyond the wonderful potential for correlation between Sears’ text and the Yoruba plays (as a further indication of overlapping signs of African-ness and the intercultural exchange of ideas over time and continents), I also find that the playwright herself merits some discussion. In a published conversation with Alison Sealy-Smith and Ric Knowles, Sears makes the following affirmation: “Only in the last thirty years have many of us [people of African descent] decided, ‘oh my gosh, we are African’” (Knowles 29). While my primary concern here is the construct of African-ness within dramatic works, I am also addressing the pitfalls in attempting to define African-ness. Sears’ profession of African-ness is problematic because it re-asserts the flawed notion of interchangeability between blackness and African-ness.

Sears’ assumption of her own African-ness indicates African-ness to be a homogeneous identity open to all those of African/black descent, a belief shared by Audre Lorde: “Those of us for whom Black is our cultural reality...[relinquish] the word in favor of some other designation of the African Diaspora, perhaps simply *African*” (qtd. in Hall 7). I argue that “simply African” is an essentialist notion, which reduces the cultural realities of diverse peoples to an imagined, generalized idea. In terms of exposure to the imagined space of Africa, Sears is no more African than Pamela Watson, the Australian woman who bicycled across the African continent. It is important to establish *where* Sears is coming from before examining her play. If Shakespeare writes

from an English white male early modern perspective and Rotimi and Ladipo write from a Nigerian/Yoruba black male colonial perspective, where does Djanet Sears write from?

Sears' quest for her African heritage is illustrated through her 1987 "auto-bio-mythography," *Afrika Solo*. In the play, the character, Janet, recreates the actual Djanet's travels through Africa in search of herself.²⁷ The "hybridized identity" (Tompkins 36) that Sears eventually arrives at through the performance of *Afrika Solo* is a clear answer to the above question: "The identity that she arrives at is a hybrid form of Guyanese and Jamaican from her parents, British from her birth, Canadian from her current home country, and the many African heritages that she has 'adopted'" (Tompkins 36). Sears, a black female contemporary playwright, thus writes from a hybrid perspective that incorporates Caribbean, Canadian, European, American and African influences. Ultimately, she names herself African Canadian and "allows a full meaning in each term" (Tompkins 36). I will, therefore, view Sears as an African Canadian and address *Harlem Duet* through that understanding of her identity, rather than represent her as African (despite her own identification with that term).

Harlem Duet clearly mediates both Shakespeare (through the original *Othello*) and African culture (through Sears' inspirational travels across the continent) as influential sources. Racial Otherness, and blackness in particular, is the central theme (unlike the Yoruba plays, where the majority of characters are black, but the trope of blackness obviously does not need to be addressed since those plays come out of a black culture). Although blackness is not specifically tied to African-ness (African-ness itself remains a distant ancestral link to the history and situations of the African-American

²⁷ Robin Breon quotes Sears' explanation of her new adopted name in his article, *Interview with Djanet Sears*: "I was in West Africa and we were getting ready to go into Mali when we went through a town called Djanet. It seemed like I had discovered a little part of myself so I made it mine" (Aisle Say Toronto).

characters), Sears' suggestions of African-ness remain evident through African-American culture.

Even before we address the actual content of the play, a significant parallel is evident between Sears' soundscape and the musical poetry of the Yoruba operatic theatre. Sears blends blues with famous African American voices to produce a distinct sound for her "rhapsodic blues tragedy." Peter Dickinson comments on "this kind of 'organic' approach to a play's sound" (191) and notes Sears' use of both traditional and contemporary African music in her earlier play, *Afrika Solo*. The synthesis of specific instruments and poetic voice in *Harlem Duet*, however, correlates to the interplay of language and music that is so essential to the Yoruba folk opera. As Obafemi points out, traditional operatic theatre relies heavily on improvisation and certain practitioners of the art even incorporate music like jazz into their performances: "Chief Ogunde, the rightly acclaimed patron of Yoruba theatre...freely mixes Jazz, African rhumba and the Yoruba gangan (talking drums) in the same dramatic experience" (14). Sears comments on the concept of improvisational theatre and music in her discussion of *Harlem Duet*:

So, when you look at improvisation, if you're going to improvise on a text and develop it all together, I can see how you'd say, 'okay, this is the song, this is the beat, this is the rhythm, these are the chords.' I feel there's something that's more interesting about that approach to theatre, too, if you include dance, if you include music, if you include a lot of the visual art forms. I think that there could be a process that could create a theatrical performance involving the basic components of jazz. (Knowles 29)

Harlem Duet, through its employment of "call and response, jazz-like improvisation over-dubbing, and underscoring" (Dickinson 191) correlates to the "African-ness" of an improvisational Yoruba play like *Oba Waja*, which is sung rather than spoken and "accompanied by traditional [talking] drums and a great deal of

dancing” (Ladipo 74). There is a recognition of a common African origin that comes out, for example, in Ogunde’s fusion of jazz, rhumba, and gangan, and Sears’ earlier synthesis of sounds in *Afrika Solo*: “Her one-woman show blended ‘everything from traditional African music, as in BaMbuti music, to contemporary African music from Africa and the diaspora, as in ‘High Life’, Rap and R&B’” (qtd. in Dickinson 191). Like *Afrika Solo*, *Harlem Duet* reflects the “African-ness” embedded in African-American music and culture.

That African-ness, which influenced the development of jazz or blues, is also intrinsic to the poetic refrains of the Yoruba language/instruments and the contemporary fusion of African and Western sounds that resulted in West African highlife and juju music. Given Sears’ exposure to West Africa, the specific parallel between her use of selected instruments and voices and the oral elements of Yoruba operatic theatre is potentially more than just a reflection of similar cultural theatrical practices. There are, however, further indications of African-ness which may or may not be intentional, but which are reflected, nonetheless, in the mirror of African-American culture.

The use of proverbs, for example, is another linguistic trope that resonates between *Harlem Duet* and Yoruba culture. As Beier, the translator of Ladipo’s plays, points out, “The Yoruba speak in proverbs and illusions. Often they find it sufficient to voice the beginning of a proverb—they can assume that their learned audience is able to complete the phrase and will know immediately how to apply this to the situation at hand” (Ladipo 75). This cultural phenomenon is prominent in both *The Gods* and *Oba Waja*, where much of the text is proverbial. In Rotimi’s play, King Odewale often speaks to his people through proverbs and even reprimands a man who does not understand the

meaning behind his words: “What is the matter, fellow, aren’t you a Yoruba man? Must proverbs be explained to you after they are said?” (32). Similarly, Ladipo’s play incorporates proverbs as useful metaphorical devices: “The blind man is sure to walk into trouble. How can the deaf man heed the warning of his friends?” (71).

Sears (consciously or unconsciously) links herself to the Yoruba playwrights (and Yoruba culture) through the inclusion of proverbs in her drama and explores the ability of an older, wiser character to convey wisdom. Billie’s father, Canada, says to his daughter, “A drunken man can get sober but a damn fool can’t ever get wise” (83). Canada plays a double role as Billie’s neglectful father and later (following her mental breakdown) a haven. As a nation, Canada signifies a liminal space between Harlem and Africa: “Up in Canada, we won’t have to please no White folks no how. I hear they got sailing ships leaving for Africa every day. Canada freedom come” (62-63). In terms of intercultural exchange/mediation, Canada is represented as a tolerant/safe space for “African-ness” and a crossover point to the imagined black homeland of “Africa.”

Canada (as a father figure) attributes the art of proverbial storytelling to an African and perpetuates that oral tradition by passing on the African’s instructional story to Billie:

You know, an old African once told me the story of a man who was struck by an arrow. His attacker was unknown. Instead of tending to his wound, he refused to remove the arrow until the archer was found and punished. In the meantime, the wound festered, until finally the poison infected his entire body, eventually killing him...Now, who is responsible for this man’s death, the archer for letting go the arrow, or the man for his foolish holding on? (83)

Billie parallels the man in the story as an individual who has been hurt but refuses to heal. While the poison in the story indicates the emotional bitterness that is infecting Billie, it also identifies the literal poison she has already used on Othello’s handkerchief (I will

address this in greater detail). When she accidentally transfers some of the poison onto her own skin (93), she immediately washes her face and hands at the sink, but there is still a sense that the poison will catch up with her and she will/has become a victim of her own devices.

Through Canada's proverbial narrative, Sears is subtly but consciously indicating Africa as a source for the oral art of storytelling. I would even suggest the possibility that Sears may have encountered a story like this during her travels through West Africa.²⁸ The format of Canada's borrowed story, which carefully lays out a situation and then poses a question, is consistent with the Yoruba proverbial narrative, where the moral is not necessarily linear but open-ended and thought-provoking: "Not only are there multiple, overlapping and partly incompatible discourses, but 'the proliferation of alternative perspectives, the holding open of possibilities, the deferral of final ideological resolution, is itself a dominant value'"(Quayson 101). Canada's performance of an oral tradition and the passing on of wisdom through storytelling clearly begins with Africa and the "old African," the elder who, having learned the ancient narrative from his own predecessors, "once told [Canada] the story."

African-ness is thus associated with orality and the preservation and transmission of tradition through proverbial stories and Africa is indicated/recognized as a source for Canada's performative history. As Sears comments to Ric Knowles, "Before *Harlem Duet*, Canadian Stage had never produced a work by an author of [Black] African descent. And the problem with Canadian Stage is that it's called Canadian Stage, so it represents Canada, and I'm thinking, 'I'm Canadian, so it must represent me'" (Knowles

²⁸ The concept of a man being "struck by an arrow" is decidedly historical. Since many peoples, including the Yoruba, used bows and arrows in pre-colonial Africa, the story is probably (intended to be) an old one dating back to the period when such weapons were in use.

30). By casting Canada as a black man and noting Africa as the origin for his narrative, Sears identifies African-ness/blackness as an integral part of Canadian theatre. Sears thus indicates the intercultural exchange that led to a black presence in Canada and the influence of Western dramatic traditions like Shakespeare in forming a dramatic ideal (through the exclusion of black people).

Another significant trope in *Harlem Duet*, one that speaks specifically to African origins, is the familiar sign of fetishism. There is a strong undercurrent of voodoo²⁹ in Sears' play that directly parallels the Yoruba concept of juju. Building upon Shakespeare's representation of the handkerchief, Sears extends the concept of "black" magic by referring to superstitions and characterizing Billie as an alchemist/voodooist. The first scene of the play opens with two characters, Magi and Amah, exchanging spells for keeping men faithful: "Once I buried his socks under the blackberry bush by the front door. Sure enough, he always finds his way back home" (29). The man-binding spells clearly parallel the man-binding handkerchief in *Othello*, which makes the owner "amiable" and "subdues [her husband] entirely to her love" (3.4.55-56).

The handkerchief in *Harlem Duet*, however, has not subdued Othello and he has left Billie for a white woman named Mona: "The white Mona is, significantly, out of the picture; we only hear her offstage voice, and, at one point, catch a brief glimpse of 'a bare arm and a waft of light brown hair'" (Dickinson 199). Billie thus turns to alchemy and concocts a special potion in order to have her revenge on the unfaithful Othello: "BILLIE is by the chemical factory at the table. The book of Egyptian Alchemy sits open upon it.

²⁹ The OED defines "voodoo" as a religion practiced in the West Indies (esp. Haiti) and the southern United States, characterized by sorcery and spirit possession, and combining elements of traditional African religious rites with Roman Catholic ritual. The source for the word is identified as "vodu," the Fon word for tutelary deity or fetish.

Something is boiling in the flask and steam is coming out of the condenser. With rubber gloved hands she adds several drops of a violet liquid into the flask. She picks up a large white handkerchief with pretty red strawberries embroidered on it” (75). By poisoning Othello’s handkerchief so that there literally is “magic in the web of it,” Billie takes on the role of the Egyptian charmer in the original play: “Anyone who touches it—the handkerchief, will come to harm” (102). She also represents the sibyl in *Othello* who “in prophetic fury” sewed the handkerchief because her real name is actually Sibyl. Her father Canada’s explanation of the name further identifies Billie with voodoo and occultism: “It means prophethess. Sorceress. Seer of the future” (81).

Interestingly, the voodoo in *Harlem Duet*, like the representation of juju in *Oba Waja*, is characterized as powerless against the white presence. Although the reader/audience knows that the handkerchief “will eventually bring about [Othello’s] and (Desde)Mona’s demise” (Dickinson 190), skepticism is voiced by the character Magi regarding the potency of “black” magic against white bodies: “If this kind of stuff truly worked, Africans wouldn’t be in the situation we’re in now. Imagine all them slaves working magic on their masters—didn’t make no difference” (102). Magi, who identifies herself as African in this statement, echoes the words of Ojurongbe in *Oba Waja*: “The white man’s power...has drained the medicines from my calabash; And my magic charms he rendered impotent” (64).

Far from professing “black” power, Billie states, “Progress is going to White schools...proving we’re as good as Whites...Our success is Whiteness. We religiously seek to have what they have. Access to the White man’s world” (55). On a similar note, Ojurongbe blames white influences for interfering with Yoruba/black traditions: “The

white man's rule has spoilt our world. Do not curse me, it is not my fault...He has brought with him a new law A white man's law to which I have succumbed" (Ladipo 64). Ojurongbe is ultimately portrayed as a traitor to his own people and customs, a characterization that is implicit in *Othello* and explicit in *Harlem Duet*: "He's the one who wants to White wash his life" (Sears 66). The dead king's final curse on Ojurongbe in *Oba Waja* could easily be Billie's promise to Othello: "And you will pay for your betrayal. The white man's law will not protect you from my wrath!" (Ladipo 65). The white presence thus disrupts the natural social order of the black world.

In *Oba Waja*, the D. O., in his attempt to prevent a suicide, inhibits the *oba's* transition into the ancestral realm and eventually causes the deaths of both Ojurongbe and his son Dawudu. In *Harlem Duet*, Mona, the solitary white presence, destroys the harmonious balance that Billie and Othello have achieved in the black world of Harlem, unwittingly causing Billie's psychosis and sealing her own and Othello's fate: "*Harlem Duet* concludes with Othello's imminent departure for Cyprus, Mona, the handkerchief, and Chris Yago all in tow. Billie, meanwhile, has been institutionalized in a hospital psych ward" (Dickinson 190). Ironically, Othello (who signifies African-ness in Shakespeare's play) vehemently denies his African-ness in Sears' text. Othello's speech in defense of his American-ness is provocative and informs my own examination of African-ness and the inherent difficulty in defining that essence:

My culture is Wordsworth, Shaw, *Leave it to Beaver*, *Dirty Harry*. I drink the same water, read the same books. You're the problem if you don't see beyond my skin. If you don't hear my educated English, if you don't understand that I am a middle class educated man. I mean, what does Africa have to do with me. We struttin' around professing some imaginary connection for a land we don't know. Never seen. Never gonna see. We lie to ourselves saying, ah yeh, mother Africa, middle passage, suffering, the Whites did it to me, it's the White's fault. Strut around in African cloth pretending we human now. We human now. Some of us

are beyond that now. Spiritually beyond this race bullshit now. I am an American. (73-74)

Othello's argument *against* the African American/African Canadian claim to African-ness is interesting in light of Sears' own claim to African-ness, especially as it is performed in *Afrika Solo*: "By the end of the play, she has completed her dressing, emerging in African Boubou and a headdress" (Tompkins 36). Othello, however, represents only one side of the recurring debate over "this race bullshit." Sears also presents another position, Billie's position, where race remains a sign of culture and heritage, regardless of Wordsworth, Shaw, or educated English: "We are Black. Whatever we do is Black" (55). While notions of African-ness, African American-ness, or simply American-ness remain highly complex, especially in terms of race, I have already stressed that this paper is about African-ness, not blackness. Although African Americans and African people (like the Yoruba) might share the common sign of blackness, African-ness remains an elusive cultural identity, one that is not adopted by simply "emerging in African Boubou and a headdress." *Harlem Duet* generally throws tropes of natural/ethnic identity into question (through Othello's voice) and represents the construction of identity through intercultural influences, thus signifying hybridity and the lack of a "true" cultural essence.

Sears' text demonstrates, however, that there are (logically) identifiable tropes of African-ness in the culture, music, and traditions of people of African descent. The drama brings us full circle and deepens the racial content that Shakespeare began to explore in *Othello*. Sears develops the notion of Africa as a source (for both Shakespeare and "black" cultures) by (re)writing *Othello* as a post-colonial drama that represents African-ness as a fundamental underlying presence. As Billie states in mimicry of

Othello's earlier beliefs, "Blacks created the world, Blacks are the progenitors of European civilization, gloriana" (55). Furthermore, by juxtaposing *Harlem Duet* with *Othello* and the Yoruba plays examined here, one can truly assess how the dramatic construct of African-ness has evolved in such distinct cultural spaces as Elizabethan England, modern Nigeria, and Canada. Aside from the diffusion of ideas of African-ness via European encounters with pre-colonial Africa, the slave trade, and imperialism, Sears' drama specifically identifies *Othello* and the widespread tradition of Shakespeare as significant forces in the global circulation of ideas of African-ness.

*"This Thing of Darkness I Acknowledge Mine"*³⁰

In my introduction, you will recall that I posed a central question: How has the literary construct/trope of Africa(ness) developed across time, continents, and cultures? By comparing these representations of Africa(ness), the signs that shaped them, and the specific cultures and traditions that produced/informed them, I have been able to provide one example of how Africa(ness) evolved in Elizabethan, contemporary Yoruba, and contemporary Canadian theatre. The points of axis that emerge among these plays spanning three continents allow for the possibility of not only a common dramatic characterization of African-ness, but the circulation of ideas through intercultural exchange. This exploration remains crucial in establishing the undervalued influence of Africa on a mainstream Western playwright like Shakespeare and acknowledging all possible sources for performances of African-ness in our current and historical global literary economies.

The concept of African-ness remains elusive/illusive as a result of such imposed forces as slavery, imperialism, and the displacement of indigenous cultures in favor of

³⁰ *The Tempest* (5.1.275-76)

Eurocentric traditions. Numerous aspects of “African” culture, such as highlife, Yoruba operatic theatre, or Pidgin English, are actually amalgamations of indigenous and Western culture. In the twenty-first century atmosphere of the “global village,” cultures like the Yoruba will continue to metamorphose, resisting terms like “authentic” and further erasing ethnic distinctions. Arjun Appadurai explores this “tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization” (32) in his article, *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy*:

Partly because of the spirit of the expansion of Western maritime interests after 1500, and partly because of the relatively autonomous developments of large and aggressive social formations...an overlapping set of ecumenes began to emerge, in which congeries of money, commerce, conquest, and migration began to create durable cross-societal bonds. This process was accelerated by the technology transfers and innovations of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries...which created complex colonial orders centred on European capitals and spread throughout the non-European world. *This intricate and overlapping set of Eurocolonial worlds (first Spanish and Portuguese, later principally English, French, and Dutch) set the basis for a permanent traffic in ideas of peoplehood and selfhood, which created the imagined communities...of recent nationalisms throughout the world* [author’s emphasis]. (28)

In light of Appadurai’s accurate observations regarding our current global situation, it is clearly difficult to define an essence such as African-ness, let alone identify its signs in dramatic texts: “If the ‘ethnic’ were to remain purely ethnic it would still be trapped within the many larger and general economies of representation” (Rhadakrishnan 70-71). That notwithstanding, the necessity remains to negotiate African-ness as a space of ethnic identity that has been invented, constructed, and imagined through the vehicle of literature: “What the ethnic self...has to contend with is the reality of its entrapment in multiple temporalities and histories. It has to empower itself as ‘identity’ and, at the same time, realize its potential to be a site, the *topos* of a revolution that is also its own meta-revolution” (Rhadakrishnan 67).

To borrow a phrase from Stuart Hall, “What is at issue here is the capacity for self-recognition” (8). This paper is an opportunity to recognize/acknowledge African-ness, not only as part of my own identity but as a global *topos* and begin reconciling what R. Rhadakrishnan views as the two temporalities of ethnicity, “that of oppression, memory, and enforced identity, and that of emergence after the ‘break,’ the counter-memory, and heterogeneous difference” (62). The consideration of specific literary portrayals of African-ness, such as these dramatic representations, drawn from different temporal, cultural, and racial situations is a reconciliatory process. Beyond establishing distributed ideas of African ethnicity and the often identical representation of a heterogeneous reality (Rhadakrishnan 62), this paper moves towards an understanding/appreciation of the influence of the distinct ethnic identities associated with African-ness in shaping not only a Western canon (i.e. Shakespeare) but also prominent national texts in contemporary global literature.

In light of the complexity of dealing with “African-ness,” a play like *Othello*, which signifies a history of meaning, cannot be reduced to mere entertainment, especially when produced in the African continent. At the beginning of this paper, however, I quote J. C. de Graft, who documents a production of *Othello* in an African capital and the ignorance of the director regarding the significance of Shakespeare’s play in that setting. De Graft goes on to wonder just “what interpretation the actors in such a production of *Othello* would be expected to aim for” in such a culturally, racially, and historically charged atmosphere. But his final conclusion articulates the very notion of “Africa(ness)” as an imagined, heterogeneous construct that I have attempted to stress and explore in this paper. De Graft states that “perhaps that question [of interpreting

Othello] is not worth asking in Africa?" Indeed, questions of interpretation and intent regarding portrayals of African-ness merit such careful negotiation that they are *almost* not worth asking, particularly in the complex space of Africa. Ultimately, however, it is only through such questions about Africa(ness) as it has been imagined across boundaries and discourses that we can begin to establish the scope of that imagined identity and its significance as a comprehensive global presence.

Bibliography

- Achebe, Chinua. *The Trouble With Nigeria*. London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1983.
- Adediran, Biodun. *The Frontier States of Western Yorubaland: 1600-1889*. Ibadan: IFRA, 1994.
- Ademola, Frances, ed. *Reflections: Nigerian Prose and Verse*. Lagos: African UP, 1965.
- African Proverbs*. Ibadan: Bookcraft Ltd., 1998.
- Africanus, Leo. *A Geographical Historie of Africa*. Trans. John Pory. London: George Bishop, 1600.
- Appadurai, Arjun. "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy." Rpt. in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Public Worlds Vol. 1. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1996. 27-47.
- Arikpo, Okoi. *The Development of Modern Nigeria*. Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1967.
- Asgill, E. J. *African Adaptations of Greek Tragedies*. African Literature Today 11. Ed. Eldred Jones. New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1980.
- Badru, Pade. *Imperialism and Ethnic Politics in Nigera*. Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 1998.
- Barber, Karin. *The Generation of Plays: Yoruba Popular Life in Theater*. Bloomington: Indian UP, 2000.
- . "Literacy, Improvisation and the Public in Yorùbá Popular Theatre." Brown 6-27.
- Barnes, Sandra T. *Ogun: An Old God for a New Age*. Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, Inc., 1980.

- Bartels, Emily C. "Making More of the Moor: Aaron, Othello, and Renaissance Refashionings of Race." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41.4 (1990), 435-54.
- Bascom, William. *Ifa Divination: Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1969.
- . *Sixteen Cowries: Yoruba Divination from Africa to the New World*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1980.
- . *The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1969.
- Beier, Ulli, ed. *Three Nigerian Plays*. London: Longmans, 1969.
- . *Yoruba Myths*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980.
- Bhabha, Homi. "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation." Rpt. in *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1990. 291-322.
- Bishop, Rand. *African Literature, African Critics: The Forming of Critical Standards, 1947-1966*. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1988.
- Boemus, Joannes. *The Fardle of Facions*. London: Ihon Kingstone and Henry Sutton, 1555.
- Breon, Robin. "Interview with Djanet Sears: A Black Girl in Search of God." *Aisle Say Toronto*. <<http://www.aislesay.com/ONT-SEARS.html>>.
- Brown, Stewart, ed. *The Pressures of the Text: Orality, Texts and the Telling of Tales*. Birmingham, 1995.
- Burton, Jonathan. "'A most wily bird': Leo Africanus, *Othello*, and the trafficking in difference." *Loomba and Orkin* 43-63.

- Butler-Evans, Elliott. "'Haply, for I Am Black': Othello and the Semiotics of Race and Otherness." *Kaul* 139-150.
- Carril, Pepe. *Shango de Ima: A Yoruba Mystery Play*. Trans. Susan Sherman. New York: Doubleday and Co, Inc., 1970.
- Chinweizu, O. Jemie, and I. Madubuike. *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd., 1980.
- Coleman, James S. *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1958.
- Cook, Arthur Norton. *British Enterprise in Nigeria*. London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1964.
- Courlander, Harold. *Tales of Yoruba Gods and Heroes*. New York: Crown Publishers Inc., 1973.
- De Graft, J. C. *Roots in African Drama and Theatre*. African Literature Today 8. Ed. Eldred Jones. New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1976.
- Dennett, R. E. *At the Back of the Black Man's Mind*. London: Frank Cass and Co. Ltd., 1968.
- Dickinson, Peter. "Duets, Duologues, and Black Diasporic Theatre: Djanet Sears, William Shakespeare, and Others." *Modern Drama* 45.2 (2002), 188-208.
- Drewal, Margaret Thompson. *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992.
- Dunton, Chris. *Make Man Talk True: Nigerian Drama in English Since 1970*. London: Hans Zell Publishers, 1992.

- Echeruo, Michael J. *Victorian Lagos: Aspects of Nineteenth Century Lagos Life*. London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1977.
- Etherton, Michael. *The Development of African Drama*. London: Hutchinson & Co. Ltd., 1982.
- Eze, Emmanuel Chukwudi, ed. *Postcolonial African Philosophy*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997.
- Fage, J. D., ed. *From c. 500 BC to AD 1050*. The Cambridge History of Africa 2. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1978.
- Falola, Toyin. *Yoruba Gurus: Indigenous Production of Knowledge in Africa*. Trenton: Africa World Press Inc., 1999.
- Farrow, Stephen S. *Faith, Fancies and Fetich or Yoruba Paganism*. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969.
- Fischlin, Daniel and Mark Fortier. Eds. *Adaptations of Shakespeare: A Critical Anthology*. Routledge, 2000.
- Fultz, Lucille P. "Devouring Discourses: Desire and Seduction in Othello." Kaul 189-204.
- Gleason, Judith. *Orisha: The Gods of Yorubaland*. New York: Atheneum, 1971.
- Griffiths, Gereth. *African Literature in English: East and West*. Essex: Pearson Education Ltd., 2000.
- Hadfield, Andrew. "Race in 'Othello': The History and Description of Africa and the Black Legend." *Notes and Queries* 45.3 (1998), 336-38.
- Hall, Kim F. *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England*. New York: Cornell UP, 1995.

- Hall, Stuart. "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'?" *Questions of Cultural Identity*. Ed. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay. London: SAGE, 1996. 1-17.
- Hives, Frank and Gascoigne Lumley. *Ju-Ju and Justice in Nigeria*. London: John Lane the Bodley Head Ltd., 1930.
- Ibitokun, B. M. *African Drama and the Yoruba World-View*. Ibadan: Ibadan UP, 1995.
- Idowu, E. Bolaji. *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*. London: Longmans, Green and Co Ltd., 1962.
- Isichei, Elizabeth. *A History of African Societies to 1870*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.
- Jeyifo, Biodun. *The Truthful Lie*. London: New Beacon Books Ltd., 1985.
- Johnson, Alex C. *Ola Rotimi: How Significant?* African Literature Today 12. Ed. Eldred Jones. New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1982
- Johnson, Lemuel. *Shakespeare in Africa (and Other Venues): Import and the Appropriation of Culture*. Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 1998.
- Johnson, Rosalind R. "Parallels between Othello and the Historical Leo Africanus." *Bim* 18.70 (1986): 9-34.
- Jones, Eldred. "Wole Soyinka: Critical Approaches." *Wright* 51-72.
- Jordan, Constance, and Clare Carroll, eds. *The Longman Anthology of British Literature: The Early Modern Period*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc., 1999.
- July, Robert W. *Precolonial Africa: An Economic and Social History*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975.
- Kanneh, Kadiatu. *African Identities: Race, Nation and Culture in Ethnography, Pan-Africanism and Black Literatures*. London: Routledge, 1998.

- Katrak, Ketu H. *Wole Soyinka and Modern Tragedy: A Study of Dramatic Theory and Practice*. Westport: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1986.
- Kaul, Mythili, ed. *Othello: New Essays by Black Writers*. Washington, D.C.: Howard UP, 1997.
- Knowles, Rick, ed. "The Nike Method." *Canadian Theatre Review* 97 (1998): 24-30.
- Kolapo, Femi J. "The Ife Origin and Creation Myths." *Groniek Historisch Tijdschrift: 151 Pre-kolonial Afrika*. Ed. Hans Renner and Willem Frijhof. Groningen: Stichting Groniek, 2001. 121-136.
- Ladipo, Duro. *Three Yoruba Plays*. Trans. Ulli Beier. Ibadan: Mbari Publications: 1964.
- Law, Robin. *The Oyo Empire c.1600-c.1836: A West African Imperialism in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977.
- Levin, Carole. "Backgrounds and Echoes of *Othello*: From Leo Africanus to Ignatius Sancho." *Lamar Journal of the Humanities* 22.2 (1996): 45-68.
- Lim, Walter S. H. *The Arts of Empire: The Poetics of Colonialism from Raleigh to Milton*. London: Associated University Presses, 1998.
- Lindfors, Bernth, ed. *Dem-Say: Interviews with Eight Nigerian Writers*. Austin: African and Afro-American Studies and Research Center, 1974.
- Little, Arthur J., Jr. *Shakespeare Jungle Fever: National-Imperial Re-Visions of Race, Rape, and Sacrifice*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000.
- Loomba, Ania and Martin Orkin, eds. *Post-Colonial Shakespeares*. London: Routledge, 1998.
- Maduakor, Obi. *Wole Soyinka: An Introduction to His Writing*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1986.

- Maja-Pierce, Adewale. *A Mask Dancing: Nigerian Novelists of the Eighties*. London: Hans Zell Publishers, 1992.
- McPherson, James A. "Three Great Ones of the City and One Perfect Soul: Well Met at Cyprus." Kaul 45-76.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. "Representation." *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. Ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995. 11-22.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." Rev. and rpt. in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Ed. Mohanty, Anne Russo, and Lourdes Torres. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991. 51-80.
- Mosley, Albert G. *African Philosophy*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1995.
- Mudimbe, V. Y. *The Invention of Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988.
- Nassau, Robert Hamill. *Fetichism in West Africa: Forty Years' Observation of Native Customs and Superstitions*. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969.
- Nduka, Otonti. *Western Education and the Nigerian Cultural Background*. Ibadan: Oxford UP, 1964.
- Niven, Sir Rex. *Nigeria*. London: Ernest Benn Ltd., 1967.
- Obafemi, Olufemi. *Contemporary Nigerian Theatre: Cultural Heritage and Social Vision*. Bayreuth: Bayreuth University, 1996.
- Ogude, S. E. "Literature and Racism: The Example of Othello." Kaul 151-166.
- Oheato, Ezenwa-. *Contemporary Nigerian Poetry and the Poetics of Orality*. Bayreuth: Eckhard Breiting, 1998.
- Okoli, Tunde. "ThisDayonline." Online posting. 18 March 2003.
<<http://www.online.com/archive/2002/10/08/20021008art02.html>>.

- Olupona, J. K. *Kingship, Religion, and Rituals in a Nigerian Community: A Phenomenological Study of Ondo Yoruba Festivals*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1991.
- “Othello in Context: Ethnography in the Literature of Travel and Colonization.” Jordan and Carroll 1261-73.
- Oyebade, Adebayo, ed. *The Transformation of Nigeria: Essays in Honor of Toyin Falola*. Trenton: Africa World Press Inc., 2002.
- 5 Plays: ANA/British Council 1989 Prize Winners*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books (Nigeria) Ltd., 1990.
- Quayson, Ato. “Orality - (Theory) - Textuality: Tutuola, Okri and the relationship of literary practice to oral traditions.” Brown 96-117.
- Rhadakrishnan, R. “Ethnic Identity and Post-Structuralist Difference.” *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*. Ed. Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990. 50-71.
- Rotimi, Ola. *Kurunmi*. London: Oxford UP, 1971.
- . *The Gods are Not to Blame: A Play*. London: Oxford UP, 1975.
- Sears, Djanet. *Harlem Duet*. Toronto: Scirocco Drama, 1997.
- . Introduction. *Testifyin’: Contemporary African Canadian Drama*. Ed. Djanet Sears. Vol. 1. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2000. i-xiii.
- Shakespeare, William. “Othello.” Jordan and Carroll 1179-1260.
- . *Othello*. Ed. Norman Sanders. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984.
- . *The Tragedy of Othello: The Moor of Venice*. Ed. Alvin Kernan. New York: Signet Classic, 1986.

- Smith, Robert. *Kingdoms of the Yoruba*. London: Methuen & Co Ltd., 1969.
- Sophocles I. *Oedipus the King*. Trans. David Greene. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991.
- Stevenson, Melanie. "Othello, Darwin, and the Evolution of Race in Ann-Marie MacDonald's Work." *Canadian Literature* 168 (2001): 34-53.
- Tompkins, Joanne. "Infinitely Rehearsing Performance and Identity: *Afrika Solo* and *The Book of Jessica*." *Canadian Theatre Review* 74 (1993): 35-39.
- Umoren, Joseph A. *Democracy and Ethnic Diversity in Nigeria*. Lanham: UP of America, Inc., 1996.
- Usuanlele, Uyilawa. "Colonial State and Education in Benin Division, 1897-1959." *Oyebade* 47-72.
- Watson, Pamela. *Esprit de Battuta: Alone Across Africa on a Bicycle*. London: Aurum Press, 1999.
- Wright, Edgar, ed. *The Critical Evaluation of African Literature*. London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1973.
- Young, Peter. "Tradition, Language and the Reintegration of Identity in West African Literature in England." *Wright* 23-50.

So one director of no less a play than Shakespeare's *Othello* did actually reply, when asked—in one of the capitals of Africa that shall remain nameless—why, of all the plays possible, he chose to produce this particular one: 'Oh, simply to entertain our city audiences!' Now one may ask to know what interpretation the actors in such a production of *Othello* would be expected to aim for; or perhaps that question is not worth asking in Africa?

(J. C. de Graft 20)