

## Duets, Duologues, and Black Diasporic Theatre: Djanet Sears, William Shakespeare, and Others<sup>1</sup>

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In "Notes of a Coloured Girl," the Foreword to her Governor-General's-Award-winning, 1997 play, *Harlem Duet*, African-Canadian playwright Djanet Sears traces a literary and cultural genealogy of her apprenticeship in the theatre: as reader, writer, actor, director, and audience member. Among other spectral encounters with her dramatic forebears, Sears recounts an inevitable confrontation with the ghost of Shakespeare:

As a veteran theatre practitioner of African Descent, Shakespeare's *Othello* had haunted me since I first was introduced to him. Sir Laurence Olivier in black-face. 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)

Reading *Harlem Duet*, however, one soon begins to notice that it is not just the literary ghost of Shakespeare whom Sears seems to be summoning in her play, that a whole range of other dramatic and literary voices are being called upon and responded to, and that this call and response pattern seems to be an integral aspect of her overall "blues aesthetic" (Sears and Smith 29) – not to mention of Black diasporic theatre's rewriting of the "annals of western dramatic literature," more generally. On this subject, Joanne Tompkins has persuasively argued that "[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," and that, in so doing, 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" ("Re-Citing Shakespeare" 21).

Building upon Tompkins' suggestive reading of how metatheatrical devices like images of onstage rehearsal and plays-within-plays operate counter-

discursively, in much postcolonial drama, to "unfix [the] colonial authority" (16) signified by Shakespeare,<sup>2</sup> in this paper I want to examine how Sears's equally metatheatrical *Harlem Duet* simultaneously displaces – or exorcises – Shakespeare's *Othello* and re-places that text with/in a chorus of other(ed) literary voices. I undertake this examination in two stages: first, after outlining the complex plot and dramatic structure of the play, I sketch very briefly some specific North American comparative frameworks and cultural contexts in which *Harlem Duet* might be productively situated; next, I explore more closely the play's dialogues with both the theatre and the theory of a broader Black diaspora. Here, my remarks centre on what I see as Sears's explicit engagement with two previous postcolonial revisions of Shakespeare – Aimé Césaire's *Une tempête* (1969) and Murray Carlin's *Not Now, Sweet Desdemona* (1969) – especially as each of those plays, in turn, engages with the work of Frantz Fanon and other theorists of the colonial condition. I am particularly interested in showing how *Harlem Duet* further revises the discussions of racial identity in all of these texts, by documenting its cultural and historical imbricatedness with gender identity. In this regard, it is important to take note of the extent to which Sears, as an anticolonial feminist playwright, makes use of highly theatricalized stereotypes – the stage minstrel (as castrated Black male), the madwoman in the attic (as castrating Black female) – to make highly theoretical points about the constructedness of identity and about the potential for minority communities to internalize those constructions. That this is accomplished through an appropriation of Shakespeare is no less significant, especially as the dramatic canon here functions simultaneously as a signifier of other dominant social and cultural forces.

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Workshopped at New York's Joseph Papp Public Theatre under the guidance of George C. Wolfe, *Harlem Duet* premiered in a Nightwood Theatre Company production at Toronto's Tarragon Theatre in April 1997, under the direction of Sears herself. The play updates – or, more properly, ante-dates – Shakespeare's *Othello*, by positing that before he met Desdemona, literature's most famous Moor was married to another woman: her name was Billie and she was Black. Set in a renovated brownstone apartment at the corner of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X Boulevards in contemporary Harlem, the play documents the break-up of the marriage of a middle-class, professional African-American couple. Billie, having worked to support her husband, Othello, during his PhD studies in anthropology, has just been abandoned by Othello for Mona, one of his white colleagues at Columbia University. In advance of his and Mona's departure for Cyprus to supervise, along with departmental associate Chris Yago, some graduate student fieldwork, Othello returns to Billie's apartment to collect some belongings and personal effects,

including a volume of Shakespeare's plays and a strawberry-spotted handkerchief given to him by his grandmother. In a series of duet-like scenes, Billie and Othello rehearse the highs and lows of their relationship, as well as the history and politics underscoring Othello's decision to leave Billie for a white woman. In this regard, Billie, herself a graduate student in psychology, channels her pain and anger into a complex dissection of race and sexuality as they relate to Black masculinity. For his part, Othello offers his own idiosyncratic take on the limitations of what he sees as Billie's separatist ideology, both in terms of race and gender.

Billie is strengthened in her resolve not to collapse in the wake of Othello's abandonment through the presence of her sister-in-law, Amah, and her landlady, Magi, who, if only as sounding boards for Billie's hostility, offer ongoing support, and who, like Shakespeare's Emilia and Bianca, provide Sears's female protagonist with a form of sisterly solidarity with which to counter the inherited cultural weight of the law of the father. When, however, that law manifests itself in the literal return of Billie's father, Canada (I will return to the symbolic significance of his name below), at the end of Act One, the double dose of patriarchy seems to prove too much for her. Suddenly having to deal both with Othello's justifications for leaving her and with Canada's explanations for his prior abandonment of her mother and their family in Nova Scotia, Billie gives up on academic analysis and rationalization altogether. Instead, she turns to alchemy, dousing with an assortment of magical potions the handkerchief that belonged to Othello's grandmother and that he now wants returned. Billie thus becomes the Egyptian "charmer" of Othello's speech in Act Three, scene four of Shakespeare's play, the "sibyl" (which, we eventually learn, is Billie's full name) who "[i]n her prophetic fury sewed the work" that would/will eventually bring about his and (Desde)Mona's demise (3.4.72, 74). To this end, *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, attended by Amah and Canada, who, chastened and feeling newly paternal, revises the paradigm of familial estrangement enacted by Brabantio at the beginning of Shakespeare's *Othello*. "Oh, I don't think I'm going anywhere just yet," Canada tells Amah in the play's closing lines, "— least if I can help it. Way too much leaving gone on for more than one lifetime already" (117).

The dissolution of Billie and Othello's relationship is played out, or replayed, in two other parallel plotlines that run throughout the drama, each set in Harlem during an earlier historical period, each featuring the same lead actors in the respective female and male roles. In the first, it is 1928, the height of the Harlem Renaissance, and a couple identified only as SHE and HE sit huddled in a cramped dressing room. HE shaves and gradually dons the black and white greasepaint of the stage minstrel, rehearsing the Act One, scene two speech from Shakespeare's *Othello* in which the Moor describes

how Desdemona fell in love with him and which HE has just been given the opportunity to declaim onstage opposite his new white lover. SHE, meanwhile, clutches a strawberry-spotted handkerchief and rehearses past fulfillments, as well as present losses. In the second parallel plotline, it is 1860, the eve of the outbreak of the American Civil War, and two former slaves, HER and HIM, are planning a new life for themselves in Canada. But this dream of beginning again ends in a nightmare for HER when HIM announces that he cannot leave Miss Dessy, the white woman for whom they both work.

The three stories operate in counterpoint to each other, and the syncopated rhythms established between them build in intensity throughout Act One, until in scene eight, we witness SHE standing over the lifeless body of HE, a bloody straight razor in her hand. Thereafter, that particular plotline reverses itself, unspooling backwards in Act Two, so that by the end of the play HE is still very much alive, rehearsing his lines in front of a mirror. The chiasmatic structure of the play is reinforced through the spatial situation of Billie and Othello's apartment at the corner of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X Boulevards, an intersection that reflects, as well, the different social ideologies (assimilationist versus separatist) of Othello and Billie, respectively. Moreover, the sense of Billie's being at a crossroads, one that she in fact is unable to cross, of her being caught in a feedback loop, where her life with Othello repeats itself constantly inside her head, is compounded aurally on stage through the use of voice-over sound bites (from prominent African-American figures such as Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Marcus Garvey, Jesse Jackson, Louis Farrakhan, Paul Robeson, and so on) at the start of each scene; as the play progresses towards its climax, the stage directions note that these voices "*loop and repeat the same distorted bits of sound over and over again*" (92). Finally, the dissonance of Billie and Othello's relationship is heightened still further through the musical accompaniment of a cello and double bass, which call out to the actors and audience various blues lines and riffs, again as dictated by the stage directions preceding each scene: "*a heaving melancholic blues*" in the Prologue to Act One, for example; "*a blues from deep in the Mississippi delta*" in Act One, scene two; "*a funky rendition of Aretha Franklin's 'Spanish Harlem'*" in Act Two, scene one; and so on.

Sears had previously developed this kind of "organic" approach to a play's sound and musical score as something that "conceptually reflected the major themes and ethnographic concerns of the play" in *Afrika Solo*, her one-woman show from 1987 that 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" (97). In a play styled explicitly as a "rhapsodic blues tragedy," *Harlem Duet*'s oral/aural components are more idiomatically focused, employing, through both music and speech, various techniques of call and response, jazz-like improvisation, over-dubbing, and underscoring to explore the dissonant intersections of race, gender, and sexu-

ality, among other identity categories. Summarizing her dramaturgical approach to the material through this idiom of blues, the playwright comments as follows:

When I was looking at how to approach *Harlem* as a director, the first question – “what kind of play is this? Is this a comedy, is this a tragedy?” – I came up with this phrase that this was a “*rhapsodic blues* tragedy.” That phrase talks about my cultural ties, my history. [...] There’s a wonderful book called *The Blues Aesthetic and African Americans*, and Amiri Baraka wrote a book called *Blues People* that talks about how blues music can be deconstructed and applied to any art form. So you say, “what is the construct of blues?” You have call-and-response. You have fragmentation. You have polyrhythmic solos. You have a whole list of different parts of that idiom that you can apply to theatre. Syncopation. This is a polyrhythmic solo! This is a saxophone solo! An Ella Fitzgerald solo! In *Harlem Duet* I wanted a *tension* between European culture and African American culture. I used blues music, but I asked Allen [Booth, the music and sound designer] to create blues music for a cello and a double bass. But double bass and cello says chamber music. So the blues creates that tension, it’s beautiful and it has that drama implicit in it. (“The Nike Method” 28–29; original emphasis)

This tension between European and African-American<sup>3</sup> forms of cultural expression, between Billie’s feminist and postcolonial resistance to dominant forces of acculturation and Othello’s apparent patriarchal and self-abnegating acquiescence to those same forces, evoked on stage through music and sound, is, I would argue, simultaneously accompanied by a more expressly (inter)textual form of call and response. That is, alongside Sears’s blues riff on the “crucible of cultures”<sup>4</sup> that is contemporary Harlem is another crucible of literary voices, summoned specifically by Sears to serve as a kind of chorus to her own re-writing of Shakespeare.

For example, *Harlem Duet*, as a case study in what Marianne Novy (following Adrienne Rich) has called feminist “re-visions” of Shakespeare,<sup>5</sup> can be analyzed productively alongside Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, as well as another contemporary feminist response to Shakespeare’s *Othello*, Paula Vogel’s *Desdemona (A Play About a Handkerchief)*. The connections between *Harlem Duet* and *Goodnight Desdemona* are especially resonant. Both plays are award-winning, complexly structured, highly theatrical, feminist responses to Shakespeare that were developed by Toronto’s Nightwood Theatre Company. Both plays also appear to lend themselves to interesting discussions of theatrical conventions and performance histories, especially as those conventions and histories explicitly impact on issues of gender (cross-dressing) and race (blackface, minstrelism, and the politics of casting).<sup>6</sup> However, the (counter)discursive uses to which Shakespeare’s *Othello* is put in each play are very different; as Ric Knowles

has recently argued, whereas *Goodnight Desdemona* tends to read as an “affirmation” of the privileged cultural position (not to mention High Culture theatrical tradition) from which Shakespeare’s play (and MacDonald’s own) emerges, *Harlem Duet* reads as an “intervention” against that position, particularly as it shores up normative constructions of gender, race, and class (see his “Othello in Three Times”).<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, Sears’s work might be situated within a comparative discussion of the Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts Movements of 1920s and 1960s New York, concentrating in particular on *Harlem Duet*’s dialogues with the poetry, drama, and criticism of Langston Hughes and, subsequently, with Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka’s *Dutchman* and *The Slave*, and Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf*; some of these writers are expressly mentioned by Sears in the foreword to her play. Again, one name stands out from this list as especially significant within the context of the political agenda dramatized by Sears in *Harlem Duet*. Indeed, not only does Sears’s play – as quoted above – adopt Baraka’s deconstructive approach to blues as a form; it also seems to be modelled expressly on his manifesto for a “Revolutionary Theatre,” where the action performed on stage is meant to instigate social activism and “force change” in the streets (Baraka 210). Moreover, to the extent that *Dutchman* and *The Slave* (both first staged in 1964 and both containing their own references to Shakespeare’s *Othello*) attempt, via Fanon, “to psychoanalyze the black male in America” (Piggford 75) – especially in terms of the *psychological preconditions* (i.e., an overidentification with white women as sexual objects) governing the Black man’s temporary racial servitude (for Fanon and Baraka a change in individual psychic identification and collective social consciousness was always imminent) – there are obvious parallels with the theatrical/therapeutic project undertaken by Sears in *Harlem Duet*. However, as we shall see at greater length below, Sears extends this project to an analysis of the *material conditions* (i.e., access to education, the burdens of domestic and reproductive labour, etc.) of the Black woman’s continued racial and gender servitude.

At the same time as it constructs a genealogy of African-American drama, Sears’s play might also be said to “contest” what George Elliott Clarke has called a dominant American model of Blackness, and this is revealed if one examines more closely how African-Canadian and other racial-minority Canadian playwrights (including Aboriginal playwrights) have been responding to each other’s works – again, often through the idiom of blues music (or a derivation thereof) – in the 1990s.<sup>8</sup> In this context, *Harlem Duet* begs comparison with Clarke’s own *Whylah Falls* (which also boasts an Othello as a character), or with ahdi zina mandiel’s *dark diaspora ... in dub*, or with M. Nourbese Philip’s *Coups and Calypsos*; all four plays have been anthologized in *Testifyin’: Contemporary African Canadian Drama*, an important recent

volume edited by Sears. In his article "Contesting a Model Blackness," Clarke notes that the United States' proximity to Canada has meant that "African-American blackness has been and is a model blackness, a way of conceiving and organizing African-Canadian existence. Perversely, though, we always veer away from it, only to return to it, at times, with unstinting vengeance" (2). As an example of this ambivalent relationship with African-Americanism in contemporary African-Canadian writing, Clarke cites mandiel's own "wilful revision" of Shange's *For Colored Girls* in her play *dark diaspora ... in dub* (31–39). As a further example, we might note the symbolic significance of Canada's name in *Harlem Duet* (not to mention the associations with freedom that the word holds for HER and HIM), his sudden arrival from Nova Scotia's serving to remind both his daughter and the New York audiences that were among the first to view early versions of the play that there are other historically entrenched – if geographically marginal – Black communities in North America besides Harlem.<sup>9</sup>

What is crucial to note in each of the comparative frameworks sketched above is how far we have travelled from our original discussion of *Harlem Duet's* Shakespearean intertexts. Figure and ground, or text and urtext, have, in a sense, been reversed, or at the very least the boundaries between them have been blurred. By that I mean that when we examine Sears's appropriative uses of *Othello* within the diasporic contexts of contemporary Black and women's writing, her dialogues with Shakespeare's text must be seen to be mediated through her simultaneous engagement with other minority playwrights, many of whom are themselves busy rewriting Shakespeare in their own works. In her introduction to *Testifyin'*, Sears calls *Harlem Duet* "a non-chronologically itinerant prequel to Shakespeare's *Othello*" (iii), and the phrase aptly describes not only Billie and Othello's temporally and spatially disjunctive travels through the bard's text, but also their wanderings through much of the history of postcolonial drama and theory over the past fifty years. In the remainder of this paper, I want to demonstrate how this process of textual dis-placement and cultural re-mapping operates by examining *Harlem Duet* alongside two classic postcolonial dramas from the late 1960s that also appropriate and adapt Shakespeare within an African diasporic context. In Aimé Césaire's *Une tempête* and Murray Carlin's *Not Now, Sweet Desdemona*, as in Sears's *Harlem Duet*, Shakespeare really only serves as a pre-text – both literally and metaphorically – to the more pressing cultural matter of dramatizing a theory of Black subjectivity as it relates to the history of imperialism. In this regard, each playwright is responding as much to the psychological roles of colonizer and colonized as discussed and debated by Octave Mannoni and Frantz Fanon, as he or she is to the theatrical incarnation of those roles in the relationships between Prospero and Caliban or Othello and Desdemona.

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Shakespeare scholars like Ania Loomba, Rob Nixon, Thomas Cartelli, Susan Bennett, and Lemuel Johnson, among others, have ably documented the extent to which *The Tempest* has successively been appropriated, by writers in Africa and the Caribbean especially, as a foundational allegory of the experience of colonization and the expression of cultural imperialism. The texts that have resulted from this rewriting, or recasting, of the relationship between the colonizer Prospero and the colonized Caliban have themselves become classics of postcolonial literature: the novel *A Grain of Wheat* (1968), by Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o, is one example; *Une tempête*, by Martinican poet and playwright Aimé Césaire, is another.<sup>10</sup> The massive critical attention afforded Césaire's 1969 "adaptation de *La tempête* de Shakespeare pour un théâtre nègre," as his subtitle puts it, by Shakespearean and postcolonial scholars alike has tended to obscure the fact that just one year earlier Ugandan playwright Murray Carlin staged *Not Now, Sweet Desdemona*, his own "Duologue for Black and White Within the Realm of Shakespeare's *Othello*," a powerful exploration of the inherited historical and cultural burdens of both racial prejudice and white liberalism within the context of South African Apartheid.<sup>11</sup> But as Johnson implicitly notes in the title to the first section of his study *Shakespeare in Africa*, when assessing postcolonial writers' encounters with and "dis/affiliations" (14) from the Shakespearean canon, the question of "whatever happened to Caliban's mother" should not deflect attention away from "the problem with Othello's" (and Sears picks up on this absent mother motif in her own play), especially as the latter play enacts a Manichean allegory of colonial, cultural, race, and gender relations within a First World rather than a Third World setting. According to Cartelli, such discussions of *Othello* are starting to proliferate, with the play "well on the way to replacing *The Tempest* as a favored field of debate and contention both for scholars and critics of Shakespeare, and for the increasingly numerous workers in the field of postcolonial studies" (124). "This is the case for many reasons," according to Cartelli,

not least because, as Third World cultures emerge from the shadow of colonialism, as self-styled Calibans and Mirandas begin to counter-colonize the plots laid by the receding figure of Prospero, and as "First World" societies find themselves compelled to address the inequities of internal colonization and the imperatives of multiculturalism, race – and the difference it makes – seems to matter more than ever. (124)

The difference race makes, especially within a contemporary diasporic context, is the central dialectic explored throughout Sears's *Harlem Duet*. For Othello, who claims as his culture "Wordsworth, Shaw, *Leave It to Beaver*, *Dirty*

Harry" and who avers that he is "beyond this race bullshit now" (73), "Liberation has no colour" (55). "I am not my skin," he tells Billie at the end of a long monologue. "My skin is not me" (74). But according to Billie, race is not something one can disavow so easily. "We are Black," she bluntly reminds Othello. "Whatever we do is Black" (55). For Billie, whiteness is the colour success and progress are measured in (55), and to Magi she diagnoses Othello's pursuit of the upwardly mobile, white Mona as a case of "[c]orporeal malediction," an example of "[a] Black man afflicted with Negrophobia" (66).

It is, I believe, no accident that Billie is a psychology major, nor that the language of racial pathology articulated here and elsewhere in the play should echo so closely that of Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*. The influence of Fanon's sociodiagnostic and philosophical account of "the state of being a Negro" (13; original emphasis) can also be felt in Césaire's *Une tempête* (Fanon was a fellow Martinican and quotations from Césaire's poetry can be found throughout *Black Skin, White Masks*) and Carlin's *Not Now, Sweet Desdemona*, particularly as Fanon constructs a theory of (de)colonization in opposition to that outlined by Octave Mannoni in *La Psychologie de la Colonisation* (1950), published two years before Fanon's text and significantly retitled *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization* in its English translation. In comparing Sears's play to those by Césaire and Carlin, I am particularly interested in unpacking the duets or "duologues" between Billie and Othello, Caliban and Ariel, and the Actor-Othello and the Actress-Desdemona, respectively, as well as in exploring how these onstage clashes each rehearse crucial aspects of the Mannoni-Fanon debate having to do with colonization and (co)dependency, colonization and power, and colonization and sexuality.

As Susan Bennett has noted, for Césaire and other postcolonial writers from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, the process of revising *The Tempest* "was not simply a direct encounter with the Shakespeare text but a response as well" to Mannoni's interpretation of the relationship between Prospero and Caliban as a complex of colonial authority and (co)dependency (135). Transposing Prospero and Caliban from their fictional island in the Caribbean to the politically volatile island of Madagascar circa 1947–48, Mannoni concludes that the white colonial's (i.e., Prospero's) urge to dominate stems from his minority position, which results in a sense of inferiority and a compensatory desire to exert authority; the indigenous Malagasy majority's (i.e., Caliban's) willingness to be dominated, on the other hand, stems from their paternalistic need for security and discipline. The breakdown of this relationship, according to Mannoni, disobedience or even outright revolt on the part of the colonized majority, has nothing to do with the racial or economic inequities attendant upon colonization; rather, it results from the colonial minority's abrogation of their providential responsibilities, their failure to uphold their authority.

In chapter four of *Black Skin, White Masks*, "The So-Called Dependency

Complex of Colonized Peoples," Fanon explicitly takes up and challenges Mannoni's thesis. Noting that Mannoni "has managed to achieve a grasp [...] of the psychological phenomena that govern the relations between the colonized and the colonizer" (83), Fanon nevertheless worries that "the author's 'objectivity' threatens to lead one into error" (84). It is precisely that which has been disavowed as the "subjective experience" of colonization that is needed, according to Fanon: "M. Mannoni has not tried to feel himself into the despair of the man of color confronting the white man" (86). Nor, for that matter, has Mannoni sufficiently felt himself into the white man's subject position. This results, in Fanon's estimation, in a serious misapprehension and misapplication of the colonial "inferiority complex": "A white man in a colony has never felt inferior in any respect. [...] The feeling of inferiority of the colonized is the correlative to the European's feeling of superiority. Let us have the courage to say it outright: *It is the racist who creates his inferior*" (92–93; original emphasis). What really troubles Fanon, however, is that Mannoni seems unwilling to acknowledge that it is the exploitative condition of colonization itself which provides the rationale for these complexes, that we are unable to theorize their existence prior to the colonial encounter:

If one adds that many Europeans go to the colonies because it is possible for them to grow rich quickly there, that with rare exceptions the colonial is a merchant, or rather a trafficker, one will have grasped the psychology of the man who arouses in the autochthonous population "the feeling of inferiority." As for the Malagasy "dependency complex," at least in the only form in which we can reach it and analyze it, it too proceeds from the arrival of white colonizers on the island. (108)

Something of the theoretical positions articulated by Mannoni and Fanon are reflected in Césaire's "clarifications" regarding Shakespeare's characters Ariel and Caliban, who are cast as a mulatto slave and a Black slave, respectively (9). Whereas Ariel carries out Prospero's orders faithfully and with alacrity, if occasionally with a pang of "moral anguish" (18), Caliban, who has become "a little too liberated" (18) for Prospero's liking, is openly defiant, cursing Prospero in the patron discourse imposed upon him while simultaneously singing hymns to freedom in his own "savage tongue" (19): "Uhuru!", the Swahili word for freedom, is how Césaire's Caliban first greets Prospero, before offering a grudging "Hello. But a hello crammed with wasps, toads, pox and dung" (18, 19).<sup>12</sup> Césaire's Ariel, whose philosophy is "Neither violence, nor submission" (27), has convinced himself that he is dependent upon Prospero for his freedom. Moreover, echoing Mannoni, he chalks Prospero's tyranny up to dysfunction, claiming that he and Caliban owe it both to themselves and to Prospero to "Trouble his calm until he finally acknowledges his own injustice and puts an end to it" (27). "I've often dreamt a rapturous dream," Ariel tells Caliban in the crucial first scene of the second

act, “that one day Prospero, you and I would set out as brothers to build a wonderful world, each contributing his own qualities: patience, vitality, love, will power too, and rigour, not to mention the eddying dreams without which humanity would suffocate to death” (28). Caliban, who characterizes Ariel’s “obedience” and “toadying” as Uncle Tomism (27), rejects his fellow slave’s meliorative and progressivist views of history, as well as the humanist call for a universal brotherhood among colonizers and colonized. Like the Fanon of *Black Skin, White Masks*, the Caliban of Césaire’s *Une tempête* recognizes that Prospero’s psychology is motivated not by an inferiority complex, but by a superiority complex, that his actions do not betray a will toward change, merely a will toward increasing power. “You don’t understand Prospero, at all,” he tells Ariel. “He’s not the collaborative type. He’s a man who only feels alive when he’s crushing someone. A crusher, a grinder to pulp, that’s what he is! And you talk of brotherhood!” (28).

Fanon’s concept of the colonial will to power, particularly as it is framed within both historical and contemporary conflicts around race,<sup>13</sup> is also taken up by Carlin in *Not Now, Sweet Desdemona*. In this powerful one-act play, a Black West Indian actor and his lover, a white South African actress, have gathered in an abandoned auditorium to rehearse Shakespeare’s *Othello*, which they are due to perform in three weeks. Taking as their point of departure the place in Act Three, scene three of *Othello* where Desdemona pleads Cassio’s case to the Moor, their initial disagreements about performance and dramaturgical stylings quickly devolve into larger and more recriminative debates about the nature of the play as a whole. The white actress playing Desdemona feels that the play is about love, jealousy, marriage, and that the fact that its title character is Black, while perhaps “[helping] to make him feel inferior” – a notable reversal of Mannoni’s position (see below) – “isn’t really the central issue” (30). For her Black actor-lover, however, it is the *only* issue. *Othello* is “a play on the theme of Race,” he tells her emphatically: “It’s the first play that ever was written about Colour” (29). Noting that “When [the] play was written the Age of Imperialism had already begun,” the Black actor insists that “*Othello* is about colour, and nothing but colour”: “Here stands Othello – the black man – the negro. Here he stands, alone of his people. Here stands the only black man on this stage. This stage is full – overflowing – with white people. And Othello is the black man – the only black man” (32).

It would seem, then, that Mannoni’s diagnosis of the complex of psychological relationships produced by colonialism, when transferred from a Third World to a First World setting, produces an interesting reversal, at least “within the realm of Shakespeare’s *Othello*,” to quote again from the subtitle to Carlin’s play. That is, Othello, feeling conspicuous as the only Black man in Venice, compensates by affecting the superior and authoritative attitude of the noble warrior; as for the Venetians, dependent as they are on Othello’s leadership and prowess in battle (“Valiant Othello, we must straight employ

you/ Against the general enemy Ottoman” are the Duke’s first words to the Moor [1.3.49–50]), they only turn on the Moor when he lets base instinct get the better part of his judgement, thereby jeopardizing their own well-being and national security (and, significantly, this happens only when the action moves from First World Venice back to Third World Cyprus). Except that this rather too-neat explanation somehow manages to leave Desdemona’s internal psychology out of the equation, something which Carlin realizes when he has his Black actor claim that Desdemona’s insistence in pleading Cassio’s case points to the fact that her white liberalism masks – in the Fanonian sense – a desire to dominate that is equal to Prospero’s:

Desdemona the liberal! There she stands. She wants power, through love – power, yes. That’s what she wants. That’s what they all want. That’s how they feel – how they really feel. They tell themselves they’re on the side of the black man – *they* are fighting for him against his oppressors – but what they really want is to tell him what to do. Politely, of course – gently, lovingly – sometimes familiarly, almost in fun. But all the time, they’re telling him what to do. They want power, and they get it, through love – because they’re too sensitive to get it by force. And that’s her. That’s your Desdemona. There’s your part for you. Othello is her personal black man. Hers, because he is black – he’s a slave. He must do what she says – what *she* says – and she won’t leave him alone until he does. (37–38, original emphasis)

In Sears’s *Harlem Duet*, 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” (47). Othello, who professes over and over again that he is “tired of this race shit” and that he is “a member of the human race” (55), is not terribly interested in dissecting the psychology of their relationship. He only knows that he finds it “easier” to be with Mona and white women in general: “To a Black woman, I represent every Black man she has ever been with and with whom there was still so much to work out. The White women I loved saw me – could see me. [...] I am a very single, very intelligent, very employed Black man. And with White women it’s good. It’s nice” (71). It is thus left to Billie to place the power dynamics in this particular love triangle within the larger schematic of contemporary American race relations. Not so coincidentally, she does so in a language of colonial psychology and racial pathology inherited from Mannoni and Fanon:

In America, this race shit is classic behavioural disorder. Obsessions. Phobias. Delusions. Notions of persecution. Delusions of grandeur. Any one or combination of these can produce behaviours which categorize oneself as superior and another as inferior. You see, this kind of dysfunction is systematically supported by the larger society. Psychology only sees clients who can no longer function in society. We’re all mad. We just appear to be functional. (52)

This, of course, is precisely the larger point implicit in Fanon's critique of Mannoni in *Black Skin, White Masks*: at issue is not so much the correct diagnosis of which group suffers from which complex and why but rather that the system that supports such psychological and cultural distinctions – colonialism – is itself constitutively dysfunctional. And Sears's point in *Harlem Duet* seems to be that such dysfunction gets repeated and replayed throughout history, not just between but also within cultural groups: hence her use of the structural motif of three parallel plotlines; and hence her transposition of the theories of Mannoni and Fanon to the specific diasporic context of the African-American civil rights movement. To this end, Magi has her own label for what Billie, in Fanon's terms, calls Othello's "[c]orporeal malediction": "Booker T. Uppermiddleclass III. He can be found in predominantly White neighborhoods. He refers to other Blacks as 'them'. His greatest accomplishment was being invited to the White House by George Bush to discuss the 'Negro problem'" (66). Indeed, in the somewhat binaristic parameters of the play, Othello, a firm believer in Black self-improvement through education and yet dependent on the white establishment and its tokenism for his academic position at Columbia, seems to occupy a political position reminiscent not only of Mannoni's theories, but also of the rhetoric of Booker T. Washington and Martin Luther King, Jr.; Billie, by contrast, sees the educational system as reinforcing certain cultural, racial, and gender hierarchies (specifically, in terms of which research projects get funding and who gets admitted to specific schools and programs), and her militancy in the face of such institutional oppression seems of a piece with the views of Fanon, W.E.B. Dubois, and Malcolm X. Or, to put this another way, where Othello, like Césaire's Ariel, chooses to work within the system, the more revolutionary Billie, like Caliban, chooses to challenge it from without.

That Billie is attempting to effect such an assault from a doubly minoritized position – that is, as a Black woman – merits further comment, especially in light of how Sears's portrait of the toll this exacts upon Billie revises certain misogynist clichés in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. Throughout that book, Fanon is primarily concerned with "the fact of blackness" (109) as it affects Black men, generally, and Black male sexuality, more specifically. In his famous chapter on "The Negro and Psychopathology," for example, Fanon notes that the Black man is invariably eclipsed by his penis and that the Negrophobic white woman who fears being raped by the Black man secretly desires him – as, apparently, does the Negrophobic white man: "the Negrophobic woman is in fact nothing but a putative sexual partner – just as the Negrophobic man is a repressed homosexual" (156).<sup>14</sup> Both Césaire and Carlin, in their respective plays, have fun with the myth of Black male sexual potency. In *Une tempête*, for example, Eshu, "a black devil-god" (9) conjured by Caliban to interrupt Prospero's masque in celebration of Miranda and Ferdinand's impending marriage, shocks the assembled crowd and the blushing

bride, in particular, with his bawdy behaviour and his song in praise of his mighty penis/sword. And in *Not Now, Sweet Desdemona*, the Black actor playing Othello, after telling a story about the white South African prime minister turning black in the middle of making love to his wife, gets the white actress playing Desdemona to admit that when she met him she felt "wanton": "I wanted to tempt you. I wanted to arouse you. I wanted to make you want me – in a savage sort of way" (60).

In *Harlem Duet*, however, Black masculinity is clearly in crisis. On the one hand, it is tempting to read Othello's frequent protestations of emasculation throughout the play ("The Black feminist position as I experience it in this relationship, leaves me feeling unrecognized as a man," is how he puts it to Billie at one pivotal moment in the play [70]), as well as his own internalized Negrophobia (at least, as it has been diagnosed by Billie), within a Fanonian framework; that is, as stemming from his own repressed homosexuality (which would shift the focus of attention away from Mona to the equally absent presence of Chris Yago). However, in my mind, Othello's castration complex is more productively analyzed within a feminist/postcolonial critical paradigm that challenges the implicit judgment foisted upon Black women throughout *Black Skin, White Masks*, namely that they are complicit in Black men's subjugation by virtue of their "affective erethism" (60; original emphasis) and their own "infantile fantasies" (79) of whiteness.

While Sears's Othello (and Shakespeare's, for that matter) in many ways conforms to the male "black abandonment-neurotic" whom Fanon describes in chapter three of his treatise "The Man of Color and the White Woman" and whose "alienated psyche" leads him on a sexual "quest for white flesh" (81), Sears's Billie can in no way be seen to represent "All these frantic women of color" (49) described by Fanon in the preceding chapter, "The Woman of Color and the White Man," women who have purportedly turned their backs on Black men in favour of white men as a way of "whiten[ing]" or "lactif[ying]" their own souls and, by extension, their entire race (47). Just as the Black man becomes his penis in Fanon's reading of heterosexual object-choice as interracial identification, so does the Black woman become her breasts, as Fanon "transforms the maternal body itself into the equivocal site of miscegenation," "at once an effect of pollution (race-mixing) and an instrument of purification (race-whitening)" (Pellegrini 117). However, as Ann Pellegrini has recently pointed out in her very fine reading of Fanon alongside other performance texts (including the drama of Anna Deavere Smith), such representations ignore the fact that, "historically, the sexualities of black women and black men have not been policed in the same way, with the same meanings, or with the same consequences" (116). This is especially relevant when one considers the history of rape by white owners and the institution of the Mammy that accompanied Black women's experience of enslavement. Thus, while Othello labours under the misapprehension that "Black women

wear the pants that Black men were prevented from wearing” and that “the White women’s movement is different” (70), Billie reminds him that, historically, it has been the labour of Black women, reproductive and otherwise, that has fuelled the economic engines of both Black and white society, that there is a reason why Mona’s breasts appear to have no strings (both literally and metaphorically) attached to them:

Your mother worked all her life. My mother worked, her mother worked ... Most Black women have been working like mules since we arrived on this continent. Like mules. When White women were burning their bras, we were hired to hold their tits up. We looked after their homes, their children ... I don’t support you? My mother’s death paid your tuition, not mine ... (70–71)

In the end, Fanon erases the Black woman from the picture altogether, preferring, like Othello, to concentrate on the interracial dynamics between Black men and white women: “Those who grant our conclusions on the psychosexuality of the white woman may ask what we have to say about the woman of color. I know nothing about her” (179–80). *Harlem Duet* can be read as Sears’s attempt to bring the Black woman back into focus. Although the voice-overs we hear at the start of each scene in *Harlem Duet* are disproportionately male, buried in the middle of Billie’s monologue from Act One, scene ten is the refrain made famous by Sojourner Truth: “Ain’t I a woman?” (75). For Billie, this question is only partly rhetorical, so ceaselessly has Black female subjectivity been eroded by the accumulated weight and historical trauma of racism and patriarchy. Taking on this trauma costs Billie not only her marriage, but also her mind. The image of Billie, abandoned first wife, rocking back and forth and singing to herself in a Harlem psychiatric ward, being consoled first by Amah and then by Canada, furnishes Sears with a suitably dramatic ending to her play (an ending that of course is really only a beginning); it also allows her to summon one final voice from among her chorus of literary intertexts – that of Antoinette Cosway / Bertha Mason, from Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

A full examination of the connections between Sears’s play and Rhys’s novel is beyond the scope of this paper, but let me just say by way of conclusion that, in addition to the “madwoman in the attic” paradigm that each author invokes, both texts also share a three-part structure, motherless main characters who form close surrogate attachments with other women (Antoinette/Bertha with Christophine and Grace Poole, Billie with Amah and Magi) and who undergo symbolic re-namings when exchanged between men, and endings in which dreams – Bertha’s about her red dress and the fire and Billie’s about her doctor Lucinda’s flashing blue eyes – come to symbolize the waking nightmares that both women are inhabiting. As Bertha says of her dream, “It was beautiful and it reminded me of something I must do. I will

remember I thought. I will remember quite soon now” (111). For Billie, however, the question seems to be more one of forgetting, or of remembering to forget: “I have a dream...,” she starts to tell Amah, before amending “I had a dream ...” (116).

Bertha’s and Billie’s simultaneous occupation of – or, rather, imprisonment within – the double confines of domestic and colonial space must also be seen to be part of a larger cultural framework, in which the narratives of imperialism and literary history overlap and in which we witness, according to Gayatri Spivak’s reading of Rhys’s text, the “worlding” of the “Third World Woman.” Here, Bertha, the white Jamaican Creole, and Billie, the Black diasporic Canadian, undergo a process of self-othering in order to allow for a particular hegemonic reading of the canon of Western literature. Thus, recognizing that “This cardboard house where I walk at night is not England,” but rather an imagined space “lost” between two worlds (Rhys 104), Bertha realizes what she must do. In the words of Spivak, “she must play out her role, act out the transformation of her ‘self’ into that fictive Other, set fire to the house and kill herself, so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction” (251). In the same way, at the end of Sears’s play, Billie begins to suspect that her beloved Harlem is also something of a paper construction (“You’d think the doctors at Harlem hospital would be Black,” she tells Amah [114]), an imagined metropolitan centre that remains on the margins (both geographically and culturally) of mainstream white society and that itself at times marginalizes other historically important communities within the Black diaspora (including Nova Scotia, which makes Canada’s presence by his daughter’s side at the end of the play especially pertinent in light of Clarke’s comments – cited earlier – on African-Canadian literature’s proximate and paradoxical relationship with African-American Blackness). Like Bertha, Billie would appear to submit to a kind of self-immolation, retreating into an othered state of madness in order that Desdemona can become the feminist victim of patriarchal and racial violence in Shakespeare’s drama.

While Spivak, in her reading of Rhys’s text, insists that a “full literary reinscription” of the “‘Third World Woman’ as a signifier” is not easily possible nor even perhaps ideologically justifiable, she does contend that the feminist anticolonial project of (re)producing her (inter)textually does open up a “fracture or discontinuity” in both “the hegemonic definition of literature” and “the history of imperialism” (254). As such, what most links *Harlem Duet* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* is that both have forever altered the way we read the “original” texts – *Othello* and *Jane Eyre* (the one written at the dawning, the other at the approaching twilight of British imperialism) – that they are simultaneously revisiting, revising, and resisting. This takes us back to the whole issue of the textual displacement (*and* cultural re-mapping) inherent in Sears’s strategies of call and response; it also forces us to consider the extent to which the prequel, as a form that crosses genres, plays with gender, and



mixes up literary genealogies, is especially suited to postcolonial and feminist critiques of imperialism and patriarchy (one thinks as well, in this regard, of the Sycorax sections of Marina Warner's *Indigo*, or of Bharati Mukherjee's *The Holder of the World*, a novel that imagines a secret colonial life in India for one of the Salem antecedents of Hawthorne's Hester Prynne). For what Sears has done in summoning within her own magnificently polyphonic play the added voices of Césaire, Carlin, Fanon, Mannoni, and Rhys, among many others (not least William Shakespeare's), is to have effectively revised, within the explicit context of contemporary Black diasporic theatre, the very foundations and preconditions of literary inheritance. In so doing, she proleptically displaces Shakespeare's *Othello* from its anterior position in dramatic history, so that by the end of *Harlem Duet* it is no longer clear which of these playwrights is calling and which is responding to whom.

## NOTES

- 1 My thanks to the anonymous reviewers of this paper for their trenchant comments and to Ric Knowles for sharing with me his own take on Sears's play. I have taught *Harlem Duet* four times now, in successive undergraduate drama classes at the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University. I want to acknowledge the added insights into the play that I have gained as a result of my students' close analyses of the text.
- 2 For a further discussion of how metatheatricality functions as a "strategy of resistance" (42) in postcolonial drama – not just counter-discursively, but also allegorically and in terms of mimicry – see Tompkins "'Spectacular Resistance.'"
- 3 The elision of "African-Canadian" cultural forms is significant here. See my discussion of Clarke's "Contesting a Model Blackness" below.
- 4 An earlier and much abbreviated version of this paper was prepared for an international conference at the University of Brussels entitled "Crucible of Cultures: Anglophone Drama at the Dawn of a New Millennium," 16–19 May 2001. The phrase "crucible of cultures" is an apt one to describe the fraught process of *métissage* at work in *Harlem Duet*, and so I have appropriated and retained it for this expanded discussion of Sears's text.
- 5 See, for example, her introduction to the edited collection *Transforming Shakespeare*.
- 6 At the start of the penultimate scene of *Harlem Duet*, we hear the voice of Paul Robeson, the first black actor cast as the lead in *Othello*, "speaking about not being able to get decent acting roles in the U.S., and [about] how fortunate he feels to be offered a contract to play OTHELLO in England" (113). Another link between *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* and *Harlem Duet* is that in the recent March 2001 remount of the former at Toronto's Bluma Appel Theatre (with the playwright herself taking the lead role of Constance Ledbelly), Ali-

- son Sealy Smith, Billie from the original production of *Harlem Duet* was cast as Juliet.
- 7 In a comparison of MacDonald's play with Vogel's, Marianne Novy likewise reads the former as reinscribing certain dominant cultural norms (especially regarding gender and sexuality) and the latter as more resistant to those norms; see her "Saving Desdemona and/or Ourselves."
  - 8 On the importance of blues "as music and metaphor, text and intertext," (57), in Canadian drama, particularly in plays by Black and Aboriginal writers, see Wasserman.
  - 9 My thanks to Ric Knowles for his insightful comments on Clarke's position and on the ways Sears may or may not be responding to it in her play. Elsewhere, in his introduction to *Eyeing the North Star*, Clarke has stated that there are no "clear parallels between the U.S. Black Arts/Black Power movement of the 1960s and the *floraison* of African-Canadian writing in the 1990s" and that no single "African-Canadian writer has been able to play the role of Black Arts Don that Amiri Baraka dramatized in the United States in the 1960s" (xvi, xvii). Clarke, as poet, playwright, librettist, editor, anthologist, and influential critic, is perhaps being somewhat disingenuous about his own role here as cultural impresario.
  - 10 White settler colonies like Canada and Australia have produced their own rewritings of *The Tempest* (for example, Audrey Thomas's *Munchmeyer and Prospero on the Island* and David Malouf's *Blood Relations*); however, Diana Brydon has persuasively demonstrated that such rewritings, in Canada at any rate, have "been primarily a white Anglophone enterprise" ("Tempest Plainsong" 199; see also her "Rewriting *The Tempest*" and "Sister Letters"), with women writers, in particular, shifting the focus from Prospero to Miranda rather than Caliban. In these works, Brydon suggests, the "derivative discourse" (199; she borrows the term from Loomba) of nationalism masks the patron discourse of colonialism that is its necessary cohort "through indirections that displaced Caliban's presence from the figure of the colonized native onto animals or the land itself" ("Tempest Plainsong" 202). While it is true, as Brydon notes, that few First Nations writers in Canada have taken up *The Tempest* as an intertext ripe for postcolonial plunder, the Shakespearean canon has not been dispensed with altogether. Tomson Highway's *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, for example, can be read as a rewriting of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (see Honegger).
  - 11 See, as but one corrective to this critical indifference, Jyotsna Singh's suggestive reading of Carlin's play in "Othello's Identity, Postcolonial Theory, and Contemporary African Rewritings of *Othello*." Johnson also comments briefly on Carlin in *Shakespeare in Africa* (160–62); as does Tompkins in "Re-Citing Shakespeare" (20). Curiously, while Cartelli includes chapters on Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* and Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (also discussed by Singh) in his examination of the "Othello Complex" in *Repositioning Shakespeare*, he makes no mention of Carlin's play whatsoever.
  - 12 On the question of "The Negro and Language," see the first chapter of Fanon's

- Black Skin, White Masks*. The colonizing propensities of the English language, in particular, and the Black diasporic subject's redeployment of that language are also an issue in Carlin's play. "I was born in the English language, and don't you forget it!" the actor playing Othello tells the actress playing Desdemona. "I was born in the language that William Shakespeare is talking – and don't you damn well forget it, *darling* ...." (31; original emphasis).
- 13 "[I]f my play is a play about Othello's blackness, then it is a play about the race conflict in the twentieth century," notes Carlin in his introduction to *Not Now, Sweet Desdemona* (5).
- 14 Several theorists of gender and sexuality have recently commented on the phobic implications of Fanon's equation of homosexuality with racism here, as well as in his subsequent characterization of homosexuality as the fount of virtually all internalized "'hate complexes'" (183, quoting Henri Baruk): "Fault, guilt, refusal of guilt, paranoia – one is back in homosexual territory" is how he puts it a little later on in *Black Skin, White Masks* (183). See, for example, Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*, 344–47; Lee Edelman, *Homographesis*, 58–9; Diana Fuss, "Interior Colonies"; and Ann Pellegrini, *Performance Anxieties*, 116–24. It goes without saying, however, that Fanon's thesis regarding the repressed sexual dynamics of Negrophobia does provide an interesting critical paradigm through which to read Shakespeare's *Othello*, with Iago's motivations in bringing down Othello stemming as much from spurned lust and internalized homophobia as from racial hatred, and with their mock betrothal in Act Three, scene three climaxing (as it were) in the spectacularly homoerotic tableau of both men on their knees, pledging their love to each other.

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