

The Dream: An Examination of Black Identity within
Harlem Duet

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When Martin Luther King Jr. stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963, over three hundred and fifty years after Shakespeare wrote the racially compelling play, *Othello*, and thirty three years before Djanet Sears was to write her evocative prelude, *Harlem Duet*, the culmination of three hundred years of slavery and social debate seemed to have reached its overdue climax. Amidst the monumental event of desegregation in the United States, which sought to extinguish social inequality caused by unequal education, Martin Luther King gave voice to the dreams of millions of blacks who had been economically disadvantaged and culturally annihilated by racist legislation. This dream called for a new era in racial opportunity and, for many, promised liberty which had been formerly denied to them.

In her bluesy prelude to Shakespeare's *Othello*, Djanet Sears examines this dream in *Harlem Duet*, reflecting the realistic results born from Martin Luther King's idealized vision and showing the cultural repercussions of its implementation among the racially divided societies of America. Sears utilizes ample material from Martin Luther King and Malcolm X in order to establish this dream for principle characters, Billie and Othello who, although they share an initial harmonic dream of Harlem and the future, are eventually fractured by the divergent perceptions of identity they develop of and within white society. While both Billie and Othello originally dream of changing society and revolutionizing Harlem as equal black citizens in America, Sears shows that Othello abandons this dream as, in a reflection of Martin Luther King, he attempts to integrate himself into Caucasian society, forsaking his black identity and struggling to replace it with white social values. In contrast, Sears demonstrates Billie grasping at her dream, rejecting the values of her white oppressors and striving to emulate the philosophies of

Malcolm X by clinging to her identity as a free black individual who is unrestricted by white social hierarchy. Finally, Sears shows the complete dissolution of the dream and divergence of identity through Othello's relationship with a white woman, Mona; here, as well as in the alternate 1928 story of Him and Her, Othello strays from the dream, as he perceives his identity to be defined by black masculinity which, according to him, is superseded by black feminine superiority. In this play, Sears illustrates the conflict between the ideal and the real; she indicates that the struggle for freedom is characterized in many different forms and, in the event that these forms are irreconcilable, that the death of one must occur.

Billie and Othello once dreamed of freedom but, as Djanet Sears illustrates, it is not just Billie and Othello, but all blacks who once did, and still do, dream of freedom. In *Harlem Duet*, Sears initially presents an alternate version of Billie and Othello as seen through the three periods: slavery during the 1860's, the Harlem Renaissance during the 1920's, and present day. By representing Billie and Othello within these different historical periods, Sears draws upon both cultural and historical significance to illustrate the development of their dream, showing that it is not a recent construct, but is the legacy of countless generations. The dream of Harlem which Billie and Othello first share is therefore universal and harmonious and is depicted through the parallel characters of She, a representation of Billie, and He, a representation of Othello; both are shown to live in Harlem in 1928 during the Harlem Renaissance where their identical perceptions of Harlem correspond to "Martin Luther King's...dream [spoken] in a slow polyrhythmic" melody (1.1. 21). Here, Sears symbolically represents the unity between Billie and Othello through their dream by the use of harmonious music. Sears reveals the content of

Billie and Othello's initial dream when, in 1928, She remarks to He that "Harlem's the place to be now" and that "everyone who's anyone is coming here now. It's our time. In our place"; in this statement, Sears shows that the dream which He and She, and thus, Othello and Billie, dream of is represented by an inclusive "our" in Harlem, and therefore is rooted within the collective population of blacks who seek change (1.1. 21).

According to Sidney H. Bremer in his article "Home in Harlem, New York: Lessons from Harlem Renaissance Writers", Harlem provided "a subculture" to black Americans, where for the first time, blacks could develop their "own cultural resources" and effectively separate themselves from the cultural control of Caucasians (48). Bremer states that Harlem became "an organic place, a birthright community" in which "cultural institutions" could flourish and in which blacks individuals would share "history, images, social circumstances, and physical experience" (47). For Billie and Othello, this is the cultural vision which they share and, according to She, what they have "always dreamed of": freedom and a chance to form "a sanctuary", or a protected place, where "Black boutiques, Black bookstores, Black groceries...Black doctors and dentists. Black banks...owned by Blacks from the faintest gold to the bluest bronze" can form a community independent of white prejudice (1.1. 21, 2.7. 106-107). Thus, for Billie and Othello, their dream is a collective dream for the advancement of all black people and for the opportunity to form a black identity paradoxically within, yet apart from, the oppressive domain of white individuals who believe themselves superior and who have suppressed any formation of black community until this point.

This vision draws heavily from speeches by both Martin Luther King and Malcolm X in order to provide a culturally significant foundation in which the need for a

separate black identity is expressed. The harmony between Billie and Othello's dream for Harlem reflects the initial harmony within Martin Luther King and Malcolm X's dream of a successful black community, especially since, in his "I Have a Dream" speech, Martin Luther King advocates for "the unalienable rights of Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" for "black men as well as white men"; similarly, in his "Message to the Grass Roots" speech, Malcolm X calls for separate "land...freedom, justice and equality" for all blacks (King, 224; Malcolm X, 9). Here, the dream which both Martin Luther King and Malcolm X define is founded upon the principle that all people should be free and that, in order for a black identity to form, there must be "equality" between whites and blacks in America. Billie and Othello's original dream is formatted upon this vision, relying upon Martin Luther King's notion that, in "a state sweltering with the heat of injustice...with oppression", the cultural emancipation of blacks will allow "an oasis of freedom and justice" to prevail, thus ending the "persecution" that has paralyzed the expression of black independence (226). Similarly, Malcolm X encourages the formation of a black nation, especially as it pertains to the concept of "black nationalism", or the founding of a separate community of blacks in which identity and heritage can be nurtured (10). For Billie and Othello, who live at the corner of Harlem's Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Boulevards, this vision of Malcolm X's black nation, established within King's "oasis of freedom and justice", is exactly what constitutes their ideal of Harlem; it is the promise of a new hope in which black culture may flourish, cultivating and producing identity free from other influences which seek to suppress such activity. Hence, Billie and Othello's, as well as She and He's, initial synonymous dream of Harlem reflects the harmony between the dreams of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King,

illustrating the potential power in which such a movement could result, but also showing the possibilities for future dissonance and fracture.

In *Harlem Duet*, Sear illustrates the onset of this dissonance when Othello diverges from the dream that he and Billie originally conceived of Harlem, as he adheres to the teachings of Martin Luther King who eventually promoted reconciliation with Caucasian society. After leaving Billie, Othello enters a relationship with Mona, a white woman and, in contrast to the values he previously held of an autonomous and equal black community, he moves to “Columbia”, or as Billie dubs it, “Harlumbia – those 10 square blocks of Whitedom, owned by Columbia university, set smack dab in the middle of Harlem” (1.5. 67). In doing this, Othello betrays the dream he initially envisioned, exchanging his desire for an individual black identity for the values of a white society where “black pride” has no place (1.4. 55). Billie defines Othello’s new dream, where progress is not a community where “black streets teem with loud Black people”, but is illustrated by access and integration into white social hierarchy; as Billie remarks to Othello, for him “White people are always the line” and, in “religiously seek[ing] to have what they have”, Othello rejects his black identity, seeking to redefine himself within Caucasian expectations as simply “a member of the human race”, not as a proud black man (1.7. 106). This attitude, which privileges Caucasian society and encourages association between whites and blacks, is closely associated with the teachings of Martin Luther King; in his “I Have a Dream” speech, King condones the unity of “all of God’s children” and implores the black community “not [to] distrust...all white people”, but to rely on the “solid rock of brotherhood” to unite all members of the human race (224-225). Here, like Othello, King emphasizes the mutually inclusive word, “brotherhood”, and

encourages harmony between whites and blacks, visualizing a country that does away with the superficial restraints of racial prejudice and in doing so, “judges [not] by the color of...skin but by the content of...character” (226). This altered dream, as established by King, is adopted by Othello as he is “tired of this race shit”, thus disagreeing with Billie’s focus upon the importance of Black identity within Harlem while advocating for racial harmony as he believes that “liberation has no colour” (1.4. 55). Othello therefore develops a new identity in which racial emancipation is obtained by access to white society and the adoption of white ideals, thereby effectively rejecting the dream he and Billie once shared, and illustrating both his and Billie’s diverging perceptions of identity, the results of which eventually tear them apart.

In contrast to Othello and Martin Luther King, Sears shows that Billie grasps at her original dream of a separate black identity within Harlem as she promotes Malcolm X’s ideal that discourages blacks from integrating themselves into white society and recapitulating oppressive attitudes. For Billie, Othello’s willingness to adopt white values and abandon black identity is equivalent to conjugal infidelity and abandonment, reflected in Sears’s alternate 1860 chronicle of Him and Her, in which Him, a slave and representation of Othello, chooses to abandon his partner Her, a slave and representation of Billie, in order to stay with his white master as he “loves her” (1.6. 63). Billie, like Malcolm X, discourages such behaviour as it mirrors Othello’s interracial relationship with Mona, condemning it as “a disease” that is thus invasive and fatal to black activism (1.6. 67). In his speech “Message to the Grass Roots”, Malcolm X reflects Billie’s disdain while characterizing both Him and Othello’s behaviour and showing how Othello’s dream betrays and oppresses black freedom. Malcolm X uses the example of

the house Negro, who existed during slavery and “lived in the house with the master”, to illustrate this phenomenon (10). According to Malcolm X, as the house Negro lived near the master, he “loved the master more than the master loved himself” and therefore would not entertain any notions of “separation...from these...white [people]”; thus Malcolm X illustrates that this behaviour effectively recapitulates racial hierarchy and controls the black population as it refuses to “separate” and challenge white supremacy (10-11). In relation to this, like Malcolm X, Billie believes Othello’s dream to be a recapitulation of white supremacy as, according to her, Othello’s success is no longer measured by black pride and a separate black identity, but has been redefined as “Whiteness”. Sears shows that, in her condemnation of Othello’s dream, Billie clings to her original dream of a “Harlem sanctuary”, or refuge, in which “a sea of black faces” symbolizes “the beauty” of a black nation that is uninhabited by whites (1.4. 57). Billie therefore discourages the adoption of white values and, in reflecting the theories of Malcolm X, begins to reveal the fracture between her own, and Othello’s, views of identity which so closely parallel the divergence between Martin Luther King and Malcolm X.

As the dream is already cracked and fissured with the debilitating effects of divergent ideals, Sears illustrates how Billie and Othello’s original dream is fractured even more with the introduction of gender dynamics. As illustrated previously, Billie and Othello’s initial dream consisted not only of the formation of a black community within America, but also the creation of a separate black pride and identity which would emancipate and separate blacks from the oppressive power of white society. This harmonic perception is distorted not only by Billie and Othello’s diverging ideals about

identity, as reflected in the divergent teachings of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, but by Othello's belief that black men cannot gain a separate identity as they are perpetually overshadowed and superseded by black feminine superiority. As Michele Wallace states in her book, Black Macho and the Myth of the Super-woman, due to the catastrophic deculturalization process which occurred during the enslavement of blacks, black men "were compelled to accept the quasi-benevolence of the Anglo-Saxon patriarchy" which dominated white American culture at the time (32). As a result, black men formed social expectations which privileged masculinity over femininity; however, Wallace illustrates that, as black men were "robbed of their manhood" by the degradation of heavy persecution and labour, they were "divested of their authority over black women", who eventually "became the central figures in black family life" (38-39). Therefore, the advancement of black women as able-bodied and successful figures was viewed by black males as a usurpation of masculine patriarchy as they claimed that "she [the black woman] had betrayed him [the black man]" (29).

This gender conflict is indicated by Sears to be a central force within the dissolution of Billie and Othello's original dream as Othello stigmatizes separate black identity as a triumph of feminine authority. Othello states that "White men have maintained a firm grasp of the pants" and he feels "unrecognized as a man" in a relationship with a black woman since "Black women wear the pants that Black men were prevented from wearing"; therefore, he rejects Billie, and thus the original dream of a separate black identity (1.6. 70). Othello's use of the word "pants" symbolizes his desire for a patriarchal authority and conformity to social convention which values masculinity over femininity as men, in Caucasian society, traditionally wore pants and

were the authoritative leaders of the family. Thus, Sears shows that Othello abandons his original dream as he cannot dissociate the advancement of black identity from the violation of white patriarchal social convention which forbids women to gain autonomy. Sears shows Billie opposing this view. She believes that, as black women have been “working like mules” to support their families ever since the advent of slavery, feminism is inextricably entwined with the advancement of all black people and thus aids in the emancipation of both men and women (1.6. 71). Thus, the introduction of gender dynamics further serves to dissolve Billie and Othello’s original dream of black identity within Harlem as, illustrated by Michele Wallace, Othello rejects Billie and the dream since he cannot dissociate black identity from black feminism, and thus believes the formation of a black identity to be a violation of the patriarchy which he upholds.

Hence, in the establishment of a harmonic dream in *Harlem Duet*, which is eventually shattered by opposing perceptions of identity, Djanet Sears draws heavily from works and speeches by Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X in order to illustrate the divergence of Billie and Othello within white society. Initially harmonic, both Billie and Othello originally dream of changing society and revolutionizing Harlem as a haven for the development and proliferation of black culture and a separate black identity. Sears shows that Othello abandons this dream as, in a reflection of Martin Luther King, he attempts to integrate himself into white society, adopting Caucasian values and rejecting his black identity in the process. In contrast, Sears relates the alternate story of *Him and Her* and, in doing so, demonstrates how Billie grasps at her original dream by objecting to Othello’s integration into white society and by reflecting teachings by Malcolm X which condemn such behaviour among the black population as a

recapitulation of oppressive values. Finally, in reflection of Michele Wallace's philosophies upon black feminism, Sears shows the complete dissolution of the dream and divergence of identity as Othello perceives his identity to be defined by black masculinity which, according to him, is superseded by black feminine superiority; Sears illustrates a key conflict as Othello, unable to reconcile white patriarchal values with the collective advancement of all blacks, clashes with Billie's fierce conviction that black feminism, as it stands outside white patriarchy, is not a violation, but a liberation which has the power to free the entire black population. Thus, in *Harlem Duet*, Sears illustrates the progressive dissonance between Billie and Othello's perceptions of identity, as Othello comes to view black identity as defined by white values while Billie resists such ideals and adheres to the idea of a separate and culturally rich black nation. Closely imitative of the divergence between Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, the divergence between Billie and Othello is not only indicative of the division which occurred during the pinnacle of black activism in the 1960's, but is a reflection of the entire heritage of African existence on this continent. Deftly intertwined within present action of the play, the alternate stories and times of Him and Her, She and He communicate the enduring presence of these divisions where, in the deculturalization and destruction of a population, it is not just race which is upended, but gender as well. The process of developing and maintaining a new identity from the ashes of a destroyed society is complex, and Sears shows this in *Harlem Duet*, illustrating through Billie's eventual descent into madness the tragedy of such a catastrophe, and simultaneously emitting a cry of outrage as this is not simply a fictional or historical present, but is still occurring and haunting us today despite our efforts to correct such injustices.

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