

Othello's Testicles, Sybil's Womb: The Interracial Child in *Harlem Duet* and its Progenitor

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WHAT IS A PENIS without testicles? It is something severed, detached, incomplete—a hand without a thumb. It is unmistakably queer. I mean the word “queer” both in the quotidian sense offered by the *OED*—“strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric” (def. 1a)—and in the way Lee Edelman defines it: “queers—by which I mean all so stigmatized for failing to comply with heteronormative mandates—are not themselves also psychically invested in preserving the familiar familial narrativity of reproductive futurism” (*No Future* 17). The queer subject, in this line of thinking, is that which does not conform to the heterocentric injunction to procreate. The penis, thought without the testicles, likewise stands apart from the symbolic landscape of reproduction. Like Edelman’s “future-negating queer,” the unhinged penis exists outside the order of “pro-procreative ideology” (*No Future* 26, 12). The testicles themselves, unlike their isolated counterpart, are the primordial locus of futurity. The testicles in this sense have more in common with womb than penis. This article will examine testicles and wombs and, more specifically, the forms of futurity lurking within them, in Djanet Sears’s 1997 play *Harlem Duet* and its primary progenitor, William Shakespeare’s *Othello*. While Edelman is concerned with a “figural Child” who “affirms the absolute logic of reproduction itself” and “seems

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to shimmer with the iridescent promise of Noah's rainbow" (*No Future* 11, 18), I want to consider the representative of a different kind of future: the interracial child. *Harlem Duet*, like *Othello*, imagines an interracial child who is only ever hypothetical but who takes on all the more phobic resonance in its absence. In both cases, a child threatens to emerge from the union of a white woman and a black man and violate communal purity (Shakespeare 1.3.393). Complicating Edelman's claim that the child is "the obligatory token of futurity" (*No Future* 12), I would like to draw on José Esteban Muñoz's critique of the racial homogeneity at work in Edelman's analysis in order to suggest that the interracial child in *Harlem Duet* is by no means the radiant signifier of the heteronormative order. This paper argues that *Harlem Duet*, in spite of Sears's largely radical and productive feminist adaptation of Shakespeare's play, retains a certain conservatism insofar as Billie expresses an inverted version of the interracial phobia of *Othello*—she, like Shakespeare's Venice, fears that the uniracial community will be contaminated by the hypothetical interracial child.¹ *Harlem Duet*, like its Shakespearian predecessor, presents interracial coupling, and by extension the hypothetical/symbolic interracial child, primarily as a menace, a threat to the future of community. Reading *Harlem Duet* alongside *Othello* in the context of the work of queer theorists Lee Edelman and José Esteban Muñoz raises pertinent questions for the potentially troublesome join of queer and racially motivated methodologies and the possibility of subversive Shakespearian adaptation.² Can this would-be reparative

1 Clearly the imperative to maintain non-white communities is not the same as the attempt to retain the purity of an already dominant white culture. In the former case, cultural traditions may be legitimately under siege, making the drive to defend against the encroachment of white culture much more sympathetic. Nonetheless, as my analysis of *Harlem Duet* shows, phobias about interracial coupling and white contamination of non-white communities entail their own problems and challenges.

2 I wish to stress that I call *Harlem Duet* an adaptation of *Othello* only in the loose sense of the term "adaptation" developed recently by excellent and extensive work in the field of adaptation studies. *Harlem Duet* is, as Margaret Jane Kidnie shows in *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation*, a case study in the "intertextual space between work and adaptation" (85). Nonetheless, there is significant precedent for calling *Harlem Duet* an "adaptation" of *Othello* (Dedebaş 42; Gruber 346; Kidnie, *Problem* 89). By using the word "adaptation," I by no means intend to suggest that *Harlem Duet* shares a political or aesthetic agenda with its source, *Othello*. This is, rather, a highly revisionary and antagonistic adaptation that attempts to provide a voice for a hypothetical black woman, Billie, who has been entirely overlooked in Shakespeare's drama. In their "General Introduction" to their edition of the volume *Adaptations of Shakespeare* (2000), Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier write that "[a]daptation is not the right name for the work represented in this anthology, because there

adaptation of a racially phobic play do more than recast *Othello*'s trajectory toward an ethnically pure Christian Venice as Billie's desire for a racially pure black community in Harlem? How do *Othello* and *Harlem Duet*'s paranoid anxieties about the menacing interracial child trouble Edelman's critique of reproductive futurism, wherein the child is the *telos* of a hegemonic white heterotopia? Can a queer politics that opposes the normativities of reproductive futurism still find a place for the interracial child? Ultimately, I show that Sears's larger project in *Harlem Duet* transcends and casts doubt on Billie's homoracialism and suggest that the play refuses to recapitulate *Othello*'s interracial phobia by leaving Mona, Othello, and their hypothetical child to enter an ambiguous future together.

A central element of Edelman's refusal of reproductive futurism is his radical claim that "queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one" (*No Future* 17). Queerness, rather than a purveyor of any kind of production, is for Edelman a chaotic force aligned with a Lacanian death drive. In the context of this view, the hypothetical, spectral interracial children in both *Harlem Duet* and *Othello* become what Kathryn Bond Stockton calls "queer children" (16)—even in their absence, their force is always disruptive to the heteronormative and racialized communities they threaten to inhabit. José Esteban Muñoz, one of Edelman's most thorough critics, takes issue with the fact that "Edelman's critique never considers the topic of race" (94).³ Muñoz further identifies what he calls "the sticky interface between the interracial and the queer" and suggests that the "interracial and the queer coanimate each other" (93). The "sticky interface" Muñoz identifies has its roots in the fact that the interracial and the queer

is no right name" (2). Following Fischlin and Fortier, I will call *Harlem Duet* an adaptation in the knowledge that this imperfect term reduces the intertextual complexity of *Harlem Duet* and in the hope that my analysis of the play will give some indication of the subtlety and originality of Sears's virtuosic engagement with *Othello*. For a more in-depth analysis of the nature of Sears's play in the context of adaptation studies, see Margaret Jane Kidnie's *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation* (65–102). For a general look at Shakespearean adaptations see Fischlin and Fortier's *Adaptations of Shakespeare* as well as Daniel Fischlin's more recent *OuterSpeares: Shakespeare, Intermedia, and the Limits of Adaptation*.

3 It is crucial to note that when Edelman speaks of the child he is always speaking of a *symbolic* child. Hence, this talisman of the dominant order is of course representative of privilege as bestowed by that order—the child is white, wealthy, able-bodied, heterosexualized, and most likely male. Edelman would no doubt agree that the interracial child is always already excluded from the dominant order of Western heteronormativity. Nonetheless, as Muñoz's critique shows, considerations of racialized children—conspicuously lacking from *No Future*—tweak Edelman's theories in directions worth pursuing.

are both one, othered by mainstream (white/straight) society, and two, have access to a certain malleability; both exist, in one way or another, across boundaries and barriers. Stockton writes in similar terms of what she calls the “child queered by colour” (8). Muñoz and Stockton suggest that the racialized child exists apart from the heteronormative order of reproductive futurism that Edelman identifies. As Muñoz puts the issue, “[t]he future is only the stuff of some kids. Racialized kids, queer kids, are not the sovereign princes of futurity” (95). The arguments to follow largely emerge from an attempt to productively integrate Edelman’s critique of futurity with Muñoz’s call to acknowledge the racializations at work in heteronormativity. Questions of contamination and monstrous births, which this paper will take up at length, enfold the child into the “sticky interface” of queerness and the interracial and come to further complicate the question of the normative order and those who, to use Stockton’s terminology, that order queers.

I will begin by grounding my argument in the well-established critical context of *Othello*, with a view toward the spectral presence of Desdemona’s hypothetical interracial child. This groundwork will allow me to more clearly establish my intervention vis-à-vis *Harlem Duet* and show how Sears’s play ultimately breaks from the interracial panic of its predecessor. While the requisite arguments about race, sexuality, and miscegenation as related sites of panic in *Othello* have been well developed, such foundational work is vital to my reading of *Othello* as a play that demonstrates certain limitations of Edelman’s theory of reproductive futurism.

The primary theoretical move this article will take is a step backwards, from penis to testicles, from sexual to reproductive organs. I will track the latent reproductive anxieties underlying the sexual interracial phobias driving much of the psychological action in both *Othello* and *Harlem Duet*. While the penis of the racial/ethnic outsider, both in scholarly understanding of early modern culture and in the work of more contemporary thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, is thought to symbolize a threat to white/Christian community, I argue that the testicles contain the symbolic potency underlying this threat. Daniel Boyarin, in an essay that probes the question of Othello’s anatomical/religious identity, analyzes the “open secret” of “Othello’s penis” (254). Boyarin concludes that Othello’s presumably circumcised penis implies that “Christendom is not Christian” because “Muslims have been inside it for nearly a millennium” (261). In *Shakespeare and the Jews*, James Shapiro offers a rich historical analysis of the Eliza-

bethans' complex relationship to the concept of circumcision.⁴ Shapiro unearths fascinating details about the “occluded threat of circumcision” underlying “Shylock’s desire to cut a pound of Antonio’s flesh” (114), as well as pointing out that “there is no evidence that circumcisions took place in early modern England” (115). Shapiro’s analysis thus reinforces Boyarin’s: circumcision held a “fascination and importance” for Elizabethans (Shapiro 114) and figured primarily as a threat to Christendom.⁵ In one case (*The Merchant of Venice*) this threat takes the form of the Christian man’s fear of forcible circumcision by the ethnic/religious other, and in the other (*Othello*) it emerges through the community’s fear that the circumcised outsider has infiltrated the boundaries of Christendom.

The interracial child was a concern for Shakespeare throughout much of his writing life. In *The Merchant of Venice* (1596) he raises the possibility that Portia could marry the Prince of Morocco. In his introduction to the audience, Morocco calls his own skin “[t]he shadowed livery of the

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4 Circumcision and castration are historically contingent ideas, related crucially, if asymmetrically. Like the penis and the testicles, circumcision and castration are importantly distinct counterparts. Shapiro uses historical evidence to draw a link between circumcision and “the idea of a (partial) sexual castration and emasculation” in the minds of Elizabethan readers (120). Taylor notes that Freud, in the twentieth century, makes a similar connection: “Freud treats *Kastration* as a synonym for *Entmannung* (unmanning)” (17). However, for Taylor, Freud’s connection of castration with emasculation is fundamentally wrong (16), as is Shapiro’s claim that the early modern English notion of castration related to the phallic phobia of circumcision. Taylor writes that “castration—in humanist Europe, as in previous societies—attacked the scrotum. In twentieth-century psychoanalysis, by contrast, castration has been redefined as an attack on the penis” (91). Critical of the psychoanalytical tendency to simply follow Freud while overlooking the nature of “castration as a changing historical practise” (92), Taylor himself sets out to track the “history of the transformations of the male genitalia in the centuries between Middleton and Freud” (92). The vast and variable genealogy of the concept of castration is beyond the scope of this essay, although the radical historical shift Taylor describes, from a testicular concept of castration to a phallic one, illuminates the critical focus I am trying to correct. If the twentieth century witnessed a shift in emphasis from the testicles to the penis, I would like to reassert the primary importance of the scrotum in the context of discussions of reproduction. Thus, my definition of the term “castration” in what follows comes from the primary sense offered by the *OED*: “The removing of the testicles” (def. 1a). Although I acknowledge the important discursive and historical connections at work, my understanding of castration is caught up neither with the notion of circumcision nor with the Freudian sense of the “castration complex” (Freud 61). Rather, I mean castration simply in the standard medical/clinical sense of testicular amputation.

5 As Taylor confirms, “Castrations of one sort or another particularly fascinated humanist Europe. The noun *eunuch(s)* appears at least 240 times in at least seventy-eight different English plays written between 1580 and the closing of the theatres in 1642” (30).

burnished sun" (2.1.2), apologizing for his ethnicity as part of his courtship strategy. Yet, as Gustav Ungerer notes in his article "Portia and the Prince of Morocco," although the Prince is "a Moor," he "does not conform to the Elizabethan stage stereotype of the villainous black Moor" (104). Morocco's race—largely offset by his nobility—is a relatively minor issue in a play generally agreed to be concerned more directly with an anti-Semitic agenda (O'Rourke 375). While the threat of the interracial child is not particularly acute in *The Merchant of Venice*, *Titus Andronicus* offers an actual interracial child, the only one in Shakespeare's oeuvre: the unnamed progeny of Aaron the Moor and Tamora, Queen of the Goths. As Shakespeare's singular tangible exemplar of interracial reproduction, Aaron and Tamora's child does not send a hopeful message about the possibilities of interracial reproduction. In "'[M]ake your garden rich in gillyvors, / And do not call them bastards': Perdita and the Possibilities for Redemptive Interracialism," Tom Wickman puts the matter thus: "It is unfortunate, if not damning, that the one mixed-race child that Shakespeare writes into his plays is imagined as the product of two of his worst villains" (np). A decade before *Othello*, Shakespeare seems to have been thinking about interracial reproduction as a dark and ugly occurrence. He returned to a closely related theme at the end of his career through his memorable depiction of the racialized child, Caliban, the semi-human and definitively unchristian son of the witch Sycorax in *The Tempest*. The trajectory just sketched suggests a career-long concern with issues of interracial coupling, miscegenation, and hideous birth. Caliban's attempted rape of Miranda, voiced in his retrospective fantasy—"I had peopled else / This isle with Calibans" (1.2.353–4)—offers one final and characteristically macabre gesture of hypothetical interracial reproduction.

In *Othello*, Shakespeare offers his most sustained dramatization of the theme of miscegenation and creates a noble Moor, Othello. Othello begins in virtue and ends in barbarism, making him more complex than either the royal Morocco or the nefarious Aaron. Brabantio is, after all, content to abide the marriage between Othello and his virginal white daughter. This is at least in part because the play begins during exceptional circumstances, when the urgent political and military concerns of Venice are enough to nullify the domestic threat of Othello's genitals. The Duke's dismissal of Brabantio's concern, however, both de-racializes and re-racializes Othello: "If virtue no delighted beauty lack, / Your son-in-law is far more fair than black" (1.3.287–88). This statement's public declaration demonstrates the civic import of this speech act; the Duke has granted Othello a kind of ethnic immunity. Rather than transcending colour bias, however, the Duke's

suggestion that Othello's righteousness overrules his blackness offers a temporary and tenuous forgiveness of the perceived problem of his general's skin colour. The Duke's statement implies that Othello's blackness requires redemption. Othello cannot be both black and virtuous. Rather, his virtue provisionally overwrites his blackness insofar as it allows him to pass for white (Vitkus 154; Neill, "'Mulattos'" 373).

I speak of Othello's "blackness," here and in the pages to follow, with an awareness of the tenuousness of the term in the early modern context. Margaret Jane Kidnie argues, in *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation*, that it is "anachronistic, a potential category error even, to assume that Shakespeare's earliest audiences readily interpreted the colour of Othello's skin as peculiarly defining of 'race'" (83). While Kidnie asserts that in the early modern period skin colour did not directly equate to a definitive racial category the way it might (problematically) for audiences today, much recent scholarship does suggest vital connections between early modern and contemporary figurations of race.⁶ I use "black" in this article as an extension of the Duke's use of the same word and of Othello's self-identification as such: "Haply, for I am black" (3.3.266). Although Othello's pathologized blackness does, in my argument, cross over into the realm of modern racial discourse, I do not mean "black" only in the way the word is used in contemporary North American parlance, that is, African-_____. The term "black" in this modern incarnation is already deeply problematic, entangled in an established critical debate that I have neither the space nor the expertise to enter into here. What I mean by Othello's "blackness" is closer to the spectrum of racializations Daniel Vitkus describes in "Turning Turk in Othello." Vitkus writes that Othello is "a hybrid who might be associated, in the minds of Shakespeare's audi-

6 In *English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama*, Mary Floyd-Wilson writes that *Othello* forms part of "the ongoing construction of modern racial categories" (3). This is not to say that early modern racial taxonomies map perfectly onto the present; Floyd-Wilson notes that one of the primary ways the English self-identified in and around the early modern period was as "northern" (4). Emily C. Bartels explains that "[w]hile 'racism' as a named ideology emerged only in the early twentieth century, what Michael Neill has described as a 'racialist ideology' was taking shape" when Shakespeare was writing *Othello* (433). In *Barbarous Play: Race on the English Renaissance Stage*, Lara Bovilsky emphasizes a "racial fluidity" that characterizes the Renaissance dramatization of race (3). Crucially, though, Bovilsky suggests that the malleability of race itself provides the clearest link between early modern and contemporary racial ideologies: "early modern racial logics have much in common with modern and contemporary ones, including most of all those elements that make racial identities unstable and incoherent" (3).

ence, with a whole set of related terms—*Moor*, *Turk*, *Ottomite*, *Saracen*, *Mahometan*, *Egyptian*, *Judean*, *Indian*—all constructed and positioned in opposition to Christian faith and virtue” (159–60). It is this oppositional nature of Othello’s racial status in which I am primarily interested; he is non-white, non-Christian, and non-northern, therefore threatening.⁷ However, because communities such as *Othello*’s Venice and Sears’s Harlem formulate a white/black binary, I will continue to rest on this dichotomy as a methodological framework. I will also continue to use the terms “racist,” “racial,” and “interracial” in my analysis of *Othello* because these are the closest available approximates for the perceptions of race and the type of xenophobia at play in Shakespeare’s work.

The unspoken anxiety of the play is the menace of Othello’s black sexuality, which figures throughout as a contagion. His sexuality is a “[p]lague” (1.1.71), threatening to invade the “fertile climate” of the city (1.1.70). Significant, here, is Iago’s suspicion that Desdemona’s is not the only womb at play: “I do suspect the lusty Moor / Hath leapt into my seat” (2.1.286–87). Iago’s representative racial phobia, then, speaks not only to his angst about his own wife’s infidelity but also to a larger communal concern: if the black man has slept with one white wife, how many more might he have seduced? The sexual threat is here, as it always is throughout the play, at least partly reproductive. If, as Iago thinks, Emilia has had sex with Othello, who is to say that she is not pregnant herself? Insofar as Othello’s sexuality is contagious Iago spreads the discourse of contagion. Iago is the primary spokesperson of racism in the play, but, as Wickman points out, in “*Othello*, characters such as Brabantio, Iago, and others act as proxies for the historical forces of racism, contributing to Othello’s downfall and enforcing the taboo against interracial relationships” (np).⁸ The Venetian stance on race, further, most likely reflects that of the audience; in Wickman’s words the play reads “as though Iago stood in for Elizabethan racists” (np). The way racial angst spreads from Iago to the other characters of the play demonstrates the dangerous infectiousness of racist discourse, all too recognizable to denizens of the contemporary world. As Celia Daileader notes, Othello “oddly prefigures the modern

7 I am also aware of an emerging critical discourse that quite rightly calls into question the category of “whiteness” as a social and historical construct (see, for example, Devon W. Carbado’s *Acting White?*, Colin Salter’s *Whiteness and Social Change*, and Jean O’Malley Halley’s *Seeing White*).

8 Wickman’s larger argument, which is pertinent to this analysis, is that “[w]ith a black Leontes, *The Winter’s Tale* can be seen as a redemptive alternative to *Othello*” (np). Precisely by staging an actual interracial child, Wickman suggests, directors could tap into the “redemptive possibilities of interracialism” (np).

myth of the hyper-sexual black male” (1). Shakespeare’s characterization of Othello’s sexuality, via Iago and the community of Venice, suggests a familiar, damaging stereotype of the black male as the wielder of ravenous, threatening, and insidious sexuality.

At the heart of all this panic lies the symbolic threat of Othello’s genitals. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon writes about the black man’s association with his sexual organs, arguing that Western society presumes that for “the black man everything in fact takes place at the genital level” (135).⁹ Certainly, insofar as Iago constructs Othello’s race, he builds that race as genital. From the outset, the general’s blackness is sexualized: “an old black ram / Is tugging your white ewe” (1.1.88–89). Iago’s image of unnatural animalistic intercourse, reinforced through his innuendo, “making the beast with two backs” (1.1.115–16), offers a vision of interracial sex as bestial and grotesque. Othello’s sexuality, of course, need not be reproductive. Perhaps he is sterile or prefers non-reproductive sex acts. Nonetheless, the *threat* that the jealous and malignant Iago purveys to the ears of Venice is explicitly procreative—Othello is the potential progenitor of future, monstrous progeny. As Ania Loomba points out in *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*, part of the monstrosity at work here is the racist association of “the black man” with the “animal” (51). Daileader writes that “copulative images” in *Othello* “highlight the idea that inter-racial sex creates a new creature—and not only in the future progeny [...] but at the very moment of sexual union” (23). The sex act itself, then, is a kind of “monstrous birth.” The white woman and the black man make an uncanny hybrid, a double-spined mutant, in the very act of their intercourse. Of course, the more explicit threat of reproduction underlies this symbolism. The threat of Othello’s sexuality is, from the beginning, the threat of procreation: “else the Devil will make a Grandsire of you” (1.1.91). The fear of racial interbreeding bleeds throughout the play into the language of interspecies breeding. This slippage emerges through the work’s most explicit moment of procreation panic: “you’ll have your / daughter covered with a Barbary horse, you’ll have your / nephews neigh to you, you’ll have coursers for cousins / and jennets for germans” (1.1.110–13). Lacking the requisitely horrific lexicon of racism, Iago appeals to an image of interspecies coupling, making Othello and Desdemona’s relationship out to be “as unnatural as the supposed lust between animals and people in Africa” (Loomba 51). Not only does this evoke the racist

⁹ For a thorough discussion of the import of Fanon’s thinking on *Harlem Duet*, see Peter Dickinson’s “Duets, Duologues, and Black Diasporic Theatre: Djanet Sears, William Shakespeare, and Others” (199–202).

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practice of associating ethnic others with animals—what Donna Haraway calls the “discursive tie between the colonized, the enslaved, the noncitizen, and the animal” (18)—it associates interracial sex acts with the bestiality taboo which is punishable by death according to Christian law (“Leviticus” 20.15).¹⁰ Beyond simply comparing interracial sex to interspecies sex, Iago imagines species-transgressive and/or race-transgressive intercourse that would result in grotesque hybrid issue. Iago pushes an interracial relation into the domain of interspecies erotics in order to articulate the threat of Othello's sexuality as animalistic, species-transgressive, and threateningly *reproductive*—the raced, animalized other becomes the potential purveyor of a monstrous brood, rampaging through the streets of Venice in search of more wombs to infect.

The origin of all this imagined pollution lies in Othello's testicles. Insofar as Othello's reproductive organs embody the menace of futurity at the heart of the play, his death becomes a kind of purgative castration.¹¹ That Othello commits suicide is less important, here, than the fact that he is driven to his death by Iago's machinations. While Lodovico realizes, too late, that Iago is at fault for everything (5.2.363), Othello's death still opens a space for communal closure and puts the “bloody period” to an end (5.2.356). In “Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in *Othello*,” Michael Neill writes that the “tableau on the bed announces a kind of plague, one that taints the sight as the deadly effluvia of pestilence poison the nostrils” (383). Part of what is poisonous is the sight of a white woman and a black man together in this intimate space. On stage, the closing of the curtains effects a literal return to an all-white community as the audience can no longer see the black man or the white woman whom he contaminated. The end, then, in this gesture toward a homogeneous community, enacts a symbolic amputation of Othello's testicles and the threat they represent.

If Othello's suicide is a castration, Desdemona's murder is an abortion. As Daileader points out, one reading of *Othello* suggests that Desdemona deserves to die because she has slept with a black man: “from the standpoint of masculinist-racist hegemony it is her defiance of paternal authority and the miscegenation taboo that results (and rightly so) in her

10 In *Titus Andronicus* Shakespeare prefigures the implication that interracial coupling creates monstrous animal offspring; the Nurse calls the “dismal, black, and sorrowful issue” of Aaron and Tamora “as loathsome as a toad / Amongst the fair-faced breeders of our clime” (4.2.66–8).

11 Peter Dickinson speaks of Othello's effeminization in *Harlem Duet* as a kind of “castration” (201).

death" (2). Thus Desdemona's death figures as a kind of abortive purgation, insofar as her contaminated body must be severed from the community.¹² On a more literal level, Desdemona's death signifies abortion insofar as there may well be a baby inside her. This rests on the open possibility that Othello and Desdemona have had sex. We do not *know* that they have consummated their marriage, but we do not know that they have not. Othello's death, then, does not pacify the threat of his child, who may well be already growing in Desdemona's womb. Desdemona's death is necessary for the complete purgation of the community. Thus the brutal final scene of *Othello*—this cesspool of still-warm, innocent blood—becomes a sacrificial ritual. All of Iago's twisted manoeuvrings come together in the end to give us this horrific spectacle, and all of it seems geared toward a project of selective breeding, the goal of a future that would preclude the existence of the interracial child and forestall further contamination of the community.

Such an understanding of *Othello* illuminates a quandary for Edelman's theory: Othello and Desdemona's interracial child, far from being "futurity's emblem," takes a place beside Edelman's queer subject in "the death drive of the dominant order" (*No Future* 31, 17).¹³ While queerness and the child occupy discrete territories in Edelman's symbolic landscape, here they exist on a continuum. For Edelman, the "sacralization of the Child" requires "the sacrifice of the queer" (*No Future* 28). Thus, Edelman's counterattack: "the Child as futurity's emblem must die" (*No Future*

12 As Bovilsky convincingly demonstrates, the early modern context suggests that Desdemona gradually *becomes racialized as black* through her union with Othello (39). This reaffirms the notion that Desdemona must die in order to ensure the appropriate continuance of the white, Christian community.

13 The reader might object, here, to a certain anachronistic conflation: Edelman mostly uses contemporary examples, and his idea of "queerness" is not translatable to the sexual politics of seventeenth-century England. I would like to point out, by way of prolepsis, that *Othello* dramatizes a heteronormative community that includes no openly queer people. Even if Shakespeare's Venice articulates queerness differently or does not articulate it at all, *Othello* privileges procreation and heterosexual sex and therefore marginalizes queerness as Edelman understands it: "an oppositional political identity" sidelined by the dictates of a mainstream "heteronormative culture" (*No Future* 17, 24). Furthermore, Edelman puts the ideas he advanced in *No Future* in a Shakespearean context in a more recent article in *Shakespeare Quarterly*. In "Against Survival: Queerness in a Time That's Out of Joint," Edelman argues that Shakespeare's Hamlet is a kind of "eternal Child" who serves as a foundational symbol in the "secularized messianicity of reproductive futurism" endemic to our literary and cultural heritage (167, 168). I by no means assume an "unhistoricist" stance here, but I believe there is value in tracing contemporary racist and heteronormative logics back to Shakespeare's era, as long as such work is undertaken with caution.

31). In *Othello*, the child as token of an unwanted future does perish. Is this, then, the kind of sacrifice Edelman wants? Of course not. Edelman seeks a nullification of the queer-hostile redemptive child. Here, however, there is *no redemptive child* but only the threat of the interracial child. An analysis of *Othello* in these terms, then, exposes some of the limits of Edelman's methodological approach, for in the context of *Othello* Edelman's demand for the death of the child recapitulates the racist logic of Venice. Countering Edelman, Muñoz voices the need for a queer politics rooted in utopianism: "I respond to Edelman's assertion that the future is the province of the child and therefore not for the queers by arguing that queerness is primarily about futurity and hope" (11). Although Muñoz largely agrees with Edelman's critique of reproductive futurism, he also insists that "[t]heories of queer temporality that fail to factor in the relational relevance of race or class merely reproduce a crypto-universal white gay subject that is weirdly atemporal" (94). While Edelman suggests that queers must locate themselves in "a certain jouissance that at once defines and negates us" (Muñoz 91), Muñoz urges the need for a queer utopianism beyond Edelman's racially homogenous vision. In what follows, I hope to further problematize Edelman's schematic by analyzing children, futurity, and reproductive organs in *Harlem Duet* and examining how in this play the interracial child figures once more as a menace with the potential to enact "the undoing of the social order" (*No Future* 28).

Harlem Duet offers a loose overture to *Othello* from the perspective of a culturally and intellectually vibrant black community within Harlem. The primary plot—set in the 1990s—follows Billie's struggle with heartache and mental illness as her long-term partner, Othello, a Columbia professor with ambitions of entering "the White man's world" (Sears 55), leaves her for an unseen white colleague, "Mona" (Sears 47).¹⁴ Billie, whose full name is "Sybil" (Sears 81), is an incarnation of Shakespeare's "sybil" (3.4.69), who in "her prophetic fury" sews the handkerchief that drives *Othello's* plot (3.4.71).¹⁵ Sears's 1990s plot takes place alongside two earlier temporal

14 Mona's unseeness reinforces the elusive, miasmic, and spectral quality of whiteness as the play dramatizes it. This is foregrounded from Mona's appearance in the *dramatis personae* as "an off-stage voice" (17). Sears flirts with Mona's ghastly presence when she provides a teasing glimpse of her body parts: "We see nothing of her but brief glimpses of a bare arm and a waft of light brown hair" (47). This is as close as the audience comes to seeing any white characters on stage.

15 It is also worth noting that Billie's name is a female variant of "William." This may be strategic insofar as it is she who threatens to recapitulate Shakespeare's racism through her commitment to unracial ideology.

threads—one set in the 1860s and one set in the 1920s—that feature avatars of the main characters, Billie and Othello. In each version, Billie grapples with the psychological trauma of having Othello leave her for a white woman, Sears’s incarnation of Shakespeare’s Desdemona. While time in this play is diffuse and unstable, the setting of Harlem—and more specifically the “corner of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X boulevards (125th and Lennox)” —is highly tangible (17), developed through great historical detail and emotional resonance. In “The Politics of Location in *Othello*, Djanet Sears’s *Harlem Duet*, and Ong Keng Sen’s *Desdemona*,” Joanne Tompkins explains the effectiveness of Sears’s setting: “Sears’s play ... is a compendium of African-American history, making reference to famous African-American historical figures, from Martin Luther King to Paul Robeson to O. J. Simpson, so that African history in North America is performed and thus documented on stage” (272).¹⁶ Sears counters Shakespeare’s homogenous Christian Venice by staging a richly layered tapestry of African-American legacies, weaved together through the common thread of this fateful intersection. On stage, this performance of Harlem as a bustling nexus of African-American history and life achieves further depth through the aural dimension, beginning in the Prologue when “*the cello and the bass call and respond to a heaving melancholic blues*” and continuing throughout the action (21).¹⁷

The central question at the heart of my analysis—and the question on which the play’s success or failure rides—is whether or not *Harlem Duet* recapitulates the dubious and violent patterns of *Othello*. Although many critics, myself included, call the play an adaptation (see note 1 above), Peter Dickinson calls it an “appropriation” (189) and Tompkins writes that it is “loosely based on Shakespeare’s *Othello*” (270). So how exactly does this adaptation map onto its source? What does it borrow, what does it steal, what does it reclaim? Perhaps the clearest point here is that Sears lifts characters directly from Shakespeare. In telling her invented, untold story of the woman who was spurned for Mona, Sears appropriates the characters of Othello and Desdemona for her own agenda. Dickinson calls *Harlem Duet* a “prequel” to *Othello* (203), but it seems to me that that term is not

16 Dedebaş adds to Tompkins’s catalogue, noting that “Though all those figures are male, Billie’s utterance ‘Ain’t I a woman?’ in her monologue in Act 1 Scene 10 draws our attention to a female black figure, Sojourner Truth, which consolidates the existence of female black subjectivity” (43). Billie also makes reference to a more tragic black female figure, Saartjie Baartman, in act 1 scene 2, a moment I take up later in this article.

17 For a more complete analysis of the role of music in *Harlem Duet*, see Dickinson (191–93).

quite right. Instead, as Tompkins points out, the temporal relation between these two plays signals an evocative chronological tension: “Even though the narrative of *Harlem Duet* is contemporary, it precedes the action in *Othello*” (272). Although the moment of Othello’s life happens before the events of *Othello*, the action of the play happens hundreds of years later, in the era of American chattel slavery, the Harlem Renaissance, and finally in the familiar world of psych wards and psychoanalysis. *Harlem Duet*’s temporal relation to *Othello* goes part of the way toward explaining the larger relationship between these two texts—Sears’s play wants to borrow the characters from and attempt to revise *Othello*, but it wilfully resists the audience’s impulse to graft the action of one play directly onto the other. Hence Tompkins’s observation that “[w]hile *Harlem Duet* is a stand-alone play, it also speaks to *Othello*” (273). Sears’s play seeks to be autonomous, to claim a space for itself as a harbinger of positive black community, but it also wants to converse—remonstratively but constructively—with *Othello*.

Nothing in *Harlem Duet* fits too neatly onto *Othello*. Dickinson observes that Sears’s response to *Othello* “crosses genres, plays with gender, and mixes up literary genealogies” (203–04). The play not only complicates its textual heritage, it also troubles temporal perception as such, resisting narrative closure as it both asserts and denies its place as a “prequel” to Shakespeare’s tragedy. In “Practical Magic: Empathy and Alienation in *Harlem Duet*,” Elizabeth Gruber argues that in its refusal of straightforward linear temporality, *Harlem Duet* embodies the very “spirit of adaptation, whereby old and new perpetually entwine” (350). Kidnie takes a similar reading, arguing that for the productivity behind the fact that the “past in *Harlem Duet* never seems ‘over’” (*Problem* 81). Instead, the past seems to linger in the present through a thematic and affective conflation of time. Likewise, the future—insofar as that future re-inscribes *Othello*—“remains implicitly located in the tragic ‘past’ of Shakespeare’s early modern English work” (Kidnie, *Problem* 87). What we have here, then, is a sprawling, inchoate present. The play’s temporal structure may be described best as schizophrenic, bearing some resemblance to what Carla Freccero has called “queer time” (489), a form of resistance to “narrative temporality” that “confound[s] the temporalities we call past, present, and future” (Freccero 489, 490). The play thus offers what Dickinson calls a “chiasmatic structure” and what Tompkins terms a “poetics of displacement” (191, 270). Sears eschews clear chains of cause and effect, instead offering a kind of miasmatic interplay between Shakespeare’s source text, her own adaptation of that text, and the various temporal structures that emerge within that adaptation.

The temporal structure of *Harlem Duet* articulates a fundamental tension. On the one hand it invites its audience to reconceptualize time as characters move freely between apparently distinct moments, and on the other hand it asks the audience to be historically accountable, attending the nuances and complex histories which Sears dramatizes. In addition to making the primary action begin prior to *Othello* yet also in a “present day” that is both the date of publication and the date of reading (Sears 17), Sears adds two auxiliary layers of time. Incarnations of the present-day Billie and Othello carry out versions of their conflict in the earliest chronological seam, which runs from 1860 to 1862, and the middle strand that takes place in 1928. In “‘There’s magic in the web of it’: Seeing Beyond Tragedy in *Harlem Duet*,” Kidnie notes that these three temporal threads also constitute “three distinct historical moments: the years leading up to Emancipation (1860–62), the Harlem Renaissance (1928), and the present day” (30). The three dovetailing plot-lines, then, occupy an interface between fiction and history, as Sears’s characters enact a counter-discourse by reappearing in various moments against the grain of linear time.

Each chronological layer articulates a different version of the domestic struggle between Billie and Othello, and each incarnation of this conflict reflects the vital historical specificity of a particular period in the formation of modern black identity. Sears’s major adaptive move is to reimagine the circumstances of this artifact of colonialist intellectual capital from the perspective of a black community in America, and the play’s three temporal strands merge and come apart through this dynamic of revision. The 1860 to 1862 seam presents an enslaved black couple on the verge of emancipation, the 1928 thread shows the free black pair as the victims of racial humiliation and the bearers of historical trauma, and the present-day layer demonstrates how competing versions of black identity trouble the ostensible liberation proffered by the civil rights movement. Thus, *Harlem Duet* provides a microcosm of a larger narrative of black American history that runs alongside the miasmic temporalities of Sears’s plot.

The position of *Harlem Duet* within its own theatrical history further complicates these temporal schematics. In Sears’s introductory essay to *Harlem Duet*, “NOTES OF A COLOURED GIRL: 32 SHORT REASONS WHY I WRITE FOR THE THEATRE,” she situates her own work in a dual relation to the history of theatre. On the one hand, the play is a directly antagonistic response to the long, dubious history of white men playing Shakespeare’s *Othello* in blackface: “Shakespeare’s *Othello* had haunted me since I was first 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). On the other hand, Sears also situates her own play within a tradition of black writing that flourished in the twentieth century. She cites an interview she did with Derek Walcott (11), closes her essay with a quotation from Langston Hughes (15), sets the action in Harlem, which naturally evokes the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance, writes in "NOTES OF A COLOURED GIRL" that "Lorraine Hansberry is my mother—in the theatre" (13), and pays tribute to a long list of artists who were "involved in the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s" (13). Not only is this play concerned with the history of black people in America, Sears explicitly places her own work within the context of an emergent black literary tradition that works to subvert the established Western canon.

Scholarly commentators on *Harlem Duet* are largely unanimous in their praise; insofar as *Harlem Duet* "writes back" to Shakespeare, it is highly successful. In "Shakespeare Re-Positioned: The Demystification of the Canon and the Subversive Strategies in *Harlem Duet* by Djanet Sears," Eda Dedebaş voices the critical consensus: *Harlem Duet* is a "post-colonial, anti-racial ... and feminist re-writing" of *Othello* (42).¹⁸ While it is true that Sears's play demonstrates a clear antiracist and feminist agenda, what happens when we read this play in a queer context, paying particular attention to the role of the threatening interracial child? How might an examination of *Othello* and Mona's child—hypothetical, although no less menacing in its absence—reconfigure Sears's antiracist and feminist message? This racialized child is clearly not the icon of Edelman's dominant order of heteronormativity, and yet as far as the phobic Billie is concerned it is a communal menace.

The three (hi)stories Sears articulates converge in the threat of interracial coupling. As Kidnie notes, "Billie and *Othello*" appear "in all three strands" and their breakup "is complicated each time by the spectre of inter-racial desire" ("magic" 30). Each chronological layer presents the relationship between *Othello* and Mona as a menace to Billie. Billie herself thus takes on one aspect of the role of Shakespeare's Venice through her phobic reaction to interracial coupling. In the 1860s and 1920s periods, the resolution of this crisis comes about through the death of *Othello* (Sears 91, 100). Unlike the earlier seams, where Shakespeare's plot is explicitly

18 Dickinson writes that Sears's play undertakes "postcolonial and feminist critiques of imperialism and patriarchy" (204). Tompkins claims that Sears achieves "positive representations of race" (273). Gruber argues that *Harlem Duet* "issues a corrective to *Othello*" through "Billie's deepening understanding of the interlocking politics of race and sex" (353).

Yet, there are
children here.

forestalled through the death of its tragic protagonist, the present-day narrative leaves Othello's fate importantly ambiguous. Othello gives his final line through an ominous offstage phone call to Sears's version of Iago: "Chris Yago, please" (Sears 112). While the implication may be that Othello's descent into doom will begin immediately following the action of *Harlem Duet*, Sears's plot offers no certainty. The future is neither "a brighter tomorrow" nor Shakespeare's purged Venice (Edelman, *No Future* 31). Instead, the play ends with a grey and hazy now, haunted by the legacies of multiple competing pasts.

Yet, there are children here. Unlike *Othello*, in which there is only the hypothetical child, *Harlem Duet* offers something more tangible in Jenny, the daughter of Billie's brother Drew and his wife Amah. Significantly, Jenny remains absent throughout the play, a lack that becomes a crucial trope insofar as the child, for Billie, always occupies a space of deferral. While Amah and Drew's family represents the future of black community in Harlem—they already have Jenny and are "trying for kid number 2" (Sears 27)—Billie's own attempts to establish a future through pregnancy are consistently nullified. She and Othello conceived twice, both times without producing a child:

MAGI: First time, he told her he believed in a woman's right to choose, but he didn't think the relationship was ready for—

AMAH: We didn't—

MAGI: Nobody did. Second time she miscarried.

AMAH: When? I don't—

MAGI: 'Bout the same time he left—no, it was before that. She was by herself ... Set down in a pool of blood. She put it in a ziplock bag ... in the freezer ... all purple and blue. (Sears 32)

Billie, despite having tried, has been unable to bring a child into the world during "[a]ll those years" she spent with Othello (Sears 31). For Billie, these two lost children come to embody a profound melancholy, which emerges symbolically through a return to the gothic image of the child in the freezer: "*BILLIE takes the small package out of her pocket. She unwraps it, revealing a small vial of fluid. She goes into the kitchen, vial in hand, turns towards the fridge, opens the freezer door and stares into it*" (Sears 90). Billie, fondling the potion with which she plans to enact her revenge, gazes into the cavity that represents the abyss of her childlessness. This macabre scene encapsulates the symbolic triangle emerging between Billie,

her unborn children, and the handkerchief: “the handkerchief ... it’s yours. Held by me for safekeeping really. To be passed on to our children—if we had any. Since we don’t, it should be returned to you, to your line” (Sears 89). Here, Billie’s relationship to her own potential children figures primarily as lack. Her response to the void of her fruitlessness is destructive: she elects to “plunge into very dangerous waters,” concocting a “plague” and infecting the man who has left her childless (Sears 102). As in *Othello*, the language of contamination is vital in *Harlem Duet*. For Billie, who nostalgically recalls a moment when she, Othello, and Jenny were mistaken for the “perfect Black family” (Sears 43), it turns out that whiteness itself “is a disease. We get infected as children, and ... and the bacteria slowly spreads, disabling the entire system” (Sears 67). Responding to this infection insofar as it manifests in Othello’s attraction to a white woman, Billie poisons the handkerchief in an attempt to engender the familiar horror of *Othello*: the purgation of community through the death of the interracial couple and the preemptive abortion of their hypothetical biracial child.

The thematic nexus of *Harlem Duet* is Billie’s phobia about interracial coupling. For Billie, the trauma of Othello’s abandonment manifests in her outrage that he has chosen “to White wash his life” (Sears 66). Seemingly, Billie is not upset because Othello has left her as much as she is angry that he has left her for “a White woman” (Sears 67). Neither Billie nor Othello entertain the idea that Mona’s race doesn’t matter. While elsewhere Othello argues that he is “beyond this race shit bullshit now” (Sears 73), in the context of gender politics he is eager to resort to racial generalizations. He maintains that “Black women are more concerned with their careers than their husbands” (Sears 70), and, after announcing his engagement to Mona, makes it clear that his attraction to her is racial: “Yes, I prefer White women. They are easier” (Sears 71). Mona, here, becomes a stand-in for white women. She never appears on stage in *Harlem Duet*, an absence that signals her status as generic white woman. For Billie, Othello’s attraction to white women is pathological, rooted in racialized self-loathing; he is a “Black man afflicted with Negrophobia” (Sears 66). Billie’s invocation of Fanon’s terminology here seems highly deliberate. Dickinson argues that it is “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*” (Fanon 196). Indeed, part of Sears’s project is a dialogue with Fanon’s psychoanalytic reading of the relationship between “the man of color” and “the white woman” (Fanon 62, 45). For Fanon, this dynamic is nothing more than a “sexual myth” (Fanon 62), an internalized social complex that the black man

must overcome. Here is Fanon ventriloquizing the black man's desire: "By loving me, she proves to me that I am worthy of a white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man" (Fanon 45). While her dead partner lies in her lap, Billie's 1862 incarnation, Her, offers a direct echo of Fanon:

Once upon a time, there was a man who wanted to find a magic spell in order to become White. After much research and investigation, he came across an ancient ritual from the caverns of knowledge of a psychic. "The only way to become White," the psychic said, "was to enter the Whiteness." And when he found his ice queen, his alabaster goddess, he fucked her. Her on his dick. He one with her, for a single shivering moment became ... her. Her and her Whiteness. (Sears 91)

Sears offers a clear parallel to the syndrome Fanon diagnoses, wherein what the black man wants to achieve, by entering the white woman, is whiteness itself. The visceral, obscene language with which Her describes interracial lovemaking mirrors Billie's own disgust at the notion. Her's description of the two bodies becoming one for a "shivering moment" brings to mind Iago's image of a "beast with two backs." Interracial sex, here, is something grotesque and transformative—the sex act causes the man to mutate, and it is precisely this mutation that the man desires. For Billie, though, this transformation is a kind of contagion insofar as his lover's whiteness corrodes the black man's blackness. Daileader writes that "miscegeny, from a racist point of view, is always at some level rape" (22), and if we follow this logic Billie becomes the racist as Mona becomes the rapist, violating the sanctity of black community.

The reproductive organ plays a crucial symbolic role in *Harlem Duet*. In the 1860 seam, Her and Him offer a grotesque vision of white interest in black genitals. Her relates the tragic story of nineteenth-century Khoi-San freak show performer Saartjie Baartman,¹⁹ explaining how "People paid to see how big her butt was, and when she died, how big her pussy was" (Sears 34). In response, Him imagines "a lot of us walking around in purgatory without genitals" (Sears 34). The legacy of the slave-owner's interest in black genitals as both a locus of potential sexual pleasure and a concern for selective breeding hangs darkly over this play and this discussion. For Billie, anxiety about interracial coupling becomes so vivid that it begins to

19 For further analysis of Baartman see "The Re-Objectification and Re-Commodification of Saartjie Baartman in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*" by Jeff Young as well as Gilles Boëtsch and Pascal Blanchard's "The Hottentot Venus: Birth of a 'Freak' (1815)" in Blanchard et al., *Human Zoos*.

manifest in her reproductive organs. Near the beginning of the play, Billie recalls seeing a black man and a white woman whom she believes to be Othello and Mona: “He looks at me. I think he looks at me. He brushes past. Then a sound emanating from ... from ... from my uterus, slips out of my mouth, shatters the spell” (Sears 34). It is, of course, no coincidence that a cry of distress issues here from the reproductive nexus of Billie’s body. For her, the sight of Othello and Mona together signals the death of the future insofar as black community has been polluted by whiteness. This contamination takes shape in a more explicit metaphor near the end of the play: “in my mirror, my womb, he has a fast growing infestation of roaches. White roaches” (Sears 103). In this nightmarish vision, Billie feels the insect-like threat of a contaminating whiteness festering in her uterus, Billie’s distress forming an inverted recapitulation of the panic of Shakespeare’s Venice. Once again the hypothetical interracial child, represented as potential in the union between Othello and Mona, figures primarily as a menace to the future of the community. The fact that Billie’s panic manifests as a kind of corrosion of the womb symbolically links her racial anxiety to her reproductive lack.

Harlem Duet’s emphasis on the black woman’s reproductive organs invites consideration of the sense in which the play is haunted by the spectres of a different kind of interracial coupling. In “The Relics of Slavery,” Jessica Millward explains that “the laws of slaveholding supported violations by slave owners against enslaved women” and that “enslaved women’s reproductive capacities were critical to sustaining the U.S. slave system” (22, 23).²⁰ As a black American woman, Billie inherits a painful lineage of black female slaves’ suffering at the hands of white male slave owners who used them both for sexual pleasure and the reproduction of “human property” (Millward 22). The same kind of mixed-race coupling—white male slave owners violating and often impregnating black slave women—also sits at the heart of the literary and theatrical history Sears inherits. Characters such as Zora Neale Hurston’s Nanny show the double bind of enslaved women who had to accept first the slave owner’s pleasure and then his wife’s wrath when the slave woman gave birth to a mixed-race child whose paternal parentage was no mystery (Hurston 17). This is also the dynamic at work in another one of *Harlem Duet’s* probable progenitors: *Mulatto: A Tragedy of the Deep South* by Langston Hughes. While writing *Harlem Duet*, Sears would have surely been aware of Hughes’s

²⁰ Millward also usefully points out that relationships between white slave owners and their female slaves and interracial children were enormously complicated, often involving genuine “affective bonds” (23).

Mulatto; it was written in 1930 by one of Sears's avowed literary inspirations at the conception of the Harlem Renaissance (Turner 9), one of the historical periods Sears dramatizes in *Harlem Duet*. The action of *Mulatto* centres on Robert Lewis, the spurned son of Colonel Thomas Norwood, a plantation owner "who is the father of four living mulatto children by his negro housekeeper" (Hughes 24). Robert Lewis's pain, the agony of the unrecognized mixed-race children of white fathers, is a crucial element of the history of slavery in America and one which has received significant literary attention. The idea of a black man having sex with and impregnating a white woman is another matter. While the practice of white men fathering interracial babies was for some centuries an officially sanctioned and culturally encouraged phenomenon, the inverse dynamic was far from condoned. Rather, as *Othello* demonstrates, the fear of the sexualized black male entering white communities and reproducing therein has been a cause of severe racial phobia since the early seventeenth century. Billie's anxiety about interracial coupling, then, is both understandable and problematic: understandable insofar as for her racial mixture carries the weight of historical trauma, problematic insofar as her discomfort with the relationship between Othello and Mona threatens to recapitulate historical prejudice and stereotypes.

Although Othello has taken up with a white woman, in the end it is Billie who becomes contaminated. By the end of the play, both her womb and her mind seem to have been corroded as the audience finds her institutionalized in the psychiatric ward of a Harlem hospital (114). Billie's confinement seems, in part, the price of her attempt to exact vengeance through witchcraft. Her friend Magi explains that "[k]arma is a strong and unforgiving force" and informs Billie that dabbling in dark magic rarely yields the desired results (103). At the level of Billie's psyche, however, the power of dark magic is real. Her institutionalization demonstrates the extent to which this play dramatizes the problematic of Billie's reversion into her previous incarnation as Shakespeare's sybil. Her response to Othello's betrayal is a retreat into a world of vengeful witchcraft and a capitulation to the correlated racial hysteria that subsumes and corrodes her. Near the end of the play, Magi reveals that Billie's racial panic is pathological: "Racism is a disease my friend, and your test just came back positive" (103). In the play's final scene, Amah suggests that Billie is on the mend: "Something in you really wants to heal" (Sears 115). Although she appears ready to heal, Billie's convalescence is conceivably interminable. She is healing not only from the trauma of Othello's departure and the resultant psychological damage but also from the deeply inscribed legacies

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of slavery, racism, and a troubled, multi-generational attempt to establish black community. Sears's play, nonetheless, leaves the audience with the impression that vengeance is not an acceptable or productive solution. Billie's stubborn commitment to black community and her fear of the pollution of whiteness emerge as infectious in themselves, although it remains difficult to differentiate between cause and symptom.

As an approach to conclusion, it may be useful to consider Kidnie's argument that the "originality" of *Harlem Duet* "rests in the particular way it articulates incompatible, yet intellectually considered and passionately held, stands on race relations" (30). Kidnie rightly observes that no one viewpoint dominates this play. Rather, a crucial ambiguity persists, and every perspective holds validity. The audience might like to believe, with Othello, that "[l]iberation has no colour" (Sears 55). Likewise, one might like to think that after hundreds of years of white hegemony Billie should be allowed access to the oasis of a black community, "an ocean in the middle of a desert" (Sears 103). Unfortunately, the play shows these utopian ideals as untenable in many everyday situations. Postracialism breaks down in the lingering racism of Othello's work environment, and a full commitment to a black community risks a reactionary fear of whiteness that threatens to recapitulate longstanding structures of racial injustice. Insofar as there is one, the message of Sears's play seems best articulated through Othello's interrupted remark: "Using discrimination to cure discrimination is not—" (53). Presumably, Othello is trying to say something along the lines of: "Using discrimination to cure discrimination is not" a viable solution. But the caesura is strategic. Sears characteristically opens a space for ambiguity and polyvocality with her own kind of circumcision: the end of Othello's phrase is snipped off.

Edelman writes that queer subjects "are the advocates of abortion" (*No Future* 31). He pits queerness, as that which symbolizes death for the prevailing social order, against the child, who embodies the "collective fantasy" of "reproductive futurism" (*No Future* 29). Troubling this line of thought, I hope to have demonstrated that in *Othello* the interracial child takes up a place alongside the queer in the "death drive" of the social order (Edelman, *No Future* 27). In this instance, Shakespeare's interracial child and Edelman's queer are comrades in arms, struggling against the hegemonomies of their respective symbolic orders. In *Harlem Duet*, as in *Othello*, interracial coupling appears most prominently as a menace. Billie is the clear protagonist of the play; she monopolizes the audience's sympathy, and for her the relationship between Mona and Othello is, quite literally, poisonous. Thus, once again, the interracial couple and their potential

child figure as threats to the future of community. Ultimately, however, Sears's play is neither a recapitulation nor a simple inversion of the racial problematic of *Othello*. Although Dickinson writes that Billie is "caught in a feedback loop, where her life with Othello repeats itself constantly inside her head" (191), I would like to emphasize that the drama plays out differently in each of the three temporal strands; Othello dies in the 1860s and 1920s but lives on in the final 1990s version of the action. What we have is not quite the recurrence of the same. Instead, Sears leaves her audience with the crucial possibility of hope—for Billie, but also for Mona, Othello, and their potential future child(ren). This promissory note finds reinforcement in Billie's psychological convalescence as well as the return of her father, Canada, whose name peals with reverberations of African-American freedom. Sears offers several valid and competing perspectives and ultimately exposes Billie's commitment to uniracial community as pathological. Most importantly, in the 1990s plot Sears allows the hypothetical interracial child to live. At the end of the play, the interracial child has not been preemptively aborted through the death of its progenitors. In her 1990s plot, Sears avoids the racially motivated murders we have seen in *Othello* and in the two earlier time periods staged in *Harlem Duet*.

Sears's play, then, may recall a more ancient model of procreation. Consider Hesiod's "Theogony":

And now came great Ouranos, bringing night with him,
And, longing for love, he settled himself all over Earth.
From his dark hiding-place, the son reached out
With his left hand, while with his right he swung
The fiendishly long jagged sickle, pruning the genitals
Of his own father with one swoop and tossing them
Behind him, where they fell to no small effect. (177–83)

Kronos, by castrating his abusive father, tells us something meaningful about the relationship of *Harlem Duet* to its progenitor. This castration is not only a nullification of Ouranos' sexual potency and the renunciation of his future children; it is also a creative act. Kronos hurls his father's genitals over his shoulder, where they land in a choppy sea and, merging with its foam, engender Aphrodite. The castration of Ouranos, then, marks a kind of peculiar, disembodied birth that gives rise to a new order of politics and sexuality, ending the tyrannical reign of Ouranos and beginning a transition into the more harmonious rule of the Olympians. Dickinson argues that *Harlem Duet* "displaces Shakespeare's *Othello* from its anterior position in dramatic history" (204). If we follow this claim back to the level of

the genital, we might infer that Sears's play itself enacts a kind of castration. What we have, then, is a creative amputation after the manner of Kronos. By displacing *Othello's* teleology, forestalling the commitment to a unira- cial future, and presenting racial phobia as pathological, Sears manages to both neutralize the racism at the heart of Shakespeare's tragedy and create a complex and nuanced vision of modern racial dynamics as they can and should be—bereft of easy solutions. By moving beyond without re-enacting and preceding without anticipating Shakespeare's plot, Sears forestalls Iago's torturous sabotage of Othello and the abortive murder of the innocent Desdemona. Snipping the "thread of futurity" (Edelman, *No Future* 30), *Harlem Duet* eschews teleology and leaves its audience with the kind of perpetual anti-future Edelman demands. This play gestures toward a different kind of symbolic order through a creative-destructive response to Shakespeare's tragedy that privileges the troublesome now over the purified future. By castrating *Othello*, Sears disrupts the pattern of castrating Othello.

The interracial child, though, remains segregated to the realm of the hypothetical, the world beyond the stage. Edelman responds to the heg- emonic and heteronormative logic of reproductive futurism by opposing futurity and its emblem, the child. In place of the child, Edelman affirms the chaotic jouissance of the death drive. Muñoz, by contrast, insists that queer politics must remain utopian. Can these two views be synthesized? One way to yoke them might be to enfold the promise of queer utopia into the interracial child, a figure who is always already queered by the dominant order. Tom Wickman argues that

[i]nterracial couples deserve interracial children, and this is nowhere more true than in Shakespeare. To watch Othello and Desdemona's relationship, over and over, come to naught is counterproductive unless it is balanced in the theater by interracial relationships that come to fruition despite hard- ships. Theater-goers have seen interracial sex in theater and on stage for several decades, and they are ready to see interracial families that triumph and redeem. (np)

While *Harlem Duet* offers a salient theatrical counter-attack to the deeply writ problems of *Othello*, it ultimately falls short of Wickman's suggestion. Had Sears actually staged a thriving interracial child at the end of *Harlem Duet*, perhaps the play would go further in its attempt to push back against the stronghold of this master narrative. But from the perspective of queer politics, one can also quickly see the danger of Wickman's language, first

in his appeal to the redemptive and then in the notion that any couple “deserves children.” The very concept of deserving children—particular as, precisely, a redemption of racial inequity—strikes me as problematic insofar as it threatens to all-too-seamlessly reinscribe the heteronormative ideology of reproductive futurism. Do gay interracial couples “deserve children”? What about the elderly? The sterile? The diseased? Those too poor to adopt? While it may do some work toward the crucial goal of greater acceptance of interracial couples and ethnically diverse communities, simply replacing the white child with the interracial child as the champion of multiculturalism and progressive ethnic tolerance threatens to recapitulate the discourse of reproductive futurism and the redemptive (if now interracial) child.

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