FULFILLING THE BOOK: SHAKESPEARE, MUSIC, IDENTITY, AND KWAME DAWES' *REQUIEM*

AN ESSAY

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Long before Caribbean writers began to discuss colonial and postcolonial identities in terms of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*—way back, in fact, before Shakespeare was born—a black African trumpeter performed regularly in the English court. Treasurer's records mention a "black trumpet," variously identified as John Black or John Blancke, who, beginning in 1507, was paid eight pennies per day. He performed at the funeral of Henry VII and the coronation of Henry VIII, who later gave him a violet gown and hat as wedding presents, and his image is preserved in at least two early modern illustrations (Ashbee and Lasocki 72; Lowe 39-40). Little else is known about the man. But as a researcher and teacher chiefly in Shakespeare studies, I find myself thinking of him often lately.

In my mind he has become connected to a project spearheaded by African-born, Jamaican-raised writer, actor, and musician Kwame Dawes. In a sense the project began in 1964 when artist Tom Feelings relocated from New York to Ghana. There he was moved to illustrate the capture of black Africans and their journey across the Atlantic in slave ships. Feelings' series of images, published in 1995 as *Middle Passage: White Ships, Black Cargo*, had a profound effect on Dawes, who sat down to write Feelings a letter of thanks. Dawes being Dawes, the letter became a collection of poems, which he called *Requiem* (1996). A few years later, in his office at the University of South Carolina, where I was a student, Dawes handed me *Requiem* and asked if it made me feel like writing music. It did, to say the least, and in 2003 our project debuted at the Columbia Museum of Art with Feelings in attendance (unfortunately, Feelings passed away later that year). His haunting images took center stage, Dawes read selected poems, and my band performed compositions based on the poems and art.

Since then, Dawes and I have performed *Requiem* before varied audiences: public school children in South Carolina, a Baptist congregation in rural North Carolina, diverse museum patrons, academics, and students in a number of settings. Observers tend to become emotionally involved in ways that a professor of literature, conditioned by the classroom, seldom sees. Maybe this happens because *Requiem* blends the personal with the conceptual. Graphic realism emanates from Feelings' images of the middle passage, and Dawes takes listeners through a number of emotional scenarios. Audience members, confronted with realities of slavery in an immediate way, situate themselves in relation to what they see happening to those Africans. That kind of personal assessment would be powerful enough for someone alone in a room with Feelings'

and Dawes' books. But in a public setting, Dawes' words and Feelings' images inspire further assessment that includes consideration of one's relationship to other members of the audience and to the geographical site of presentation. London Mayor Ken Livingstone recently apologized publicly for his city's role in the slave trade, and negotiations are now under way to take *Requiem* to his offices. The heft of the *Requiem* experience was staggering in Charleston, South Carolina; it is difficult to imagine the potential for emotional reverberation in London.

The immediacy of music has something to do with responses to *Requiem*. While I am too close to my compositions to discuss them with any objectivity, what I can speak to involves interrelationships of identity and art forms—music and literature in particular. I associate John Black/Blancke, the London trumpeter of long ago, with *Requiem* because he makes me think of the correspondences between art, identity, race, and otherness. And those correspondences bring to mind another book by Dawes, for whom the relationship between music and artistic identity has great weight. In *Natural Mysticism: Toward a New Reggae Aesthetic* (1999), Dawes argues that reggae music has come to define a postcolonial Jamaican identity—a Jamaicanness that then finds voice in other art forms, particularly literature.

That is, music can become the means of expression through which a diverse nation finds oneness and constructs an international public—and artistic—identity. Dawes' poetry in *Requiem* does not overtly address the reggae aesthetic or Jamaica. However, it resounds with questions about identity, race, nation, and power, and it demonstrates Dawes' aesthetic: echoes of African enslavement are one of its defining elements. I can't read the poems from *Requiem*, much less hear Dawes read them, without hearing, in my mind's ear, Bob Marley singing, "Every time I hear the crack of a whip/ My blood runs cold/ I remember on a slave ship/ how they brutalized our very souls." Yet while Dawes frames postcolonial Jamaican identity in terms of reggae music, a number of earlier Caribbean writers, including George Lamming in *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960), Aimé Césaire in *Une tempête* (1969), and Roberto Fernandez Retamar in "Caliban" (1971) formulate postcolonial identity for Caribbean descendents of slaves in terms of Shakespeare's Caliban and Prospero.[1]

These two conceptualizations of Caribbean identity—one based in music, the other in Shakespearean drama—converge for me in complex ways. While I am a scholar of Shakespeare, I am also a lifelong musician and have performed reggae and soca music

with Caribbean musicians for decades. As I consider the possibility of joining Dawes in London to play my own music about the middle passage—music also inescapably about Dawes and Feelings as individuals—I am overwhelmed by correlations between art and cultural and personal identity.

I can't help but wonder what music and musicianship had to do with personal identity for John Black/Blancke. Certainly neither of these surnames was the one he inherited at birth. While he was probably born in sub-Saharan Africa, the feel in his hands and against his lips of a trumpet-like instrument—an instrument that transformed his life-breath into sound for public consumption—would not necessarily have been new to him. An instrument similar to the trumpet was already in use in the Africa of that time, and a few African musicians could be found elsewhere in early modern Europe. Perhaps his horn connected him to an earlier life and a distant place. Perhaps he still found time and space in which to play tunes from that earlier life. Could those sounds have resonated with a sense of self for this man, reminding him that somewhere were people with whom he shared history and culture? Might the sounds have affirmed to him that he had once been part of a society in which his spoken name did not reference, ironically or otherwise, the color of his skin?

While the answers to these questions are unknowable, some aspects of Black/Blancke's function in the English court can be surmised. Trumpeters were an important cog in the institutionalization of court protocol, and the sound of John Black/Blancke's music would have been an integral part of court culture. Early modern English documents, Shakespeare's plays among them, indicate that trumpets of that time and place were thought of as "signaling" tools rather than musical instruments. Trumpet calls announced arrivals and departures of dignitaries or summoned courtiers to banquets. Drama of the time calls for "trumpets"—the word indicated both instrument and player, hence "the black trumpet"—to sound parleys and other military signals which probably had court analogs. Shakespearean drama also featured trumpet signals called tuckets that seem to have been character-specific, so listeners could know who approached before a given person was visible. If these trumpet signals originated in the court, there is good reason to believe that John Black/Blancke was paid to play music that denoted not his own identity, but that of English Tudor courtiers. He was an invisible man centuries before Ralph Ellison coined the term.

Yet he was heard. How are we to imagine this man as a person, an individual paid to

make music that represented others and consequently helped construct a culture in which, as early modern accounts of blackness tell us, he would have been deemed an outsider? (Loomba 36). Since Black/Blancke was paid, perhaps he was something more than a slave. England had not yet become an active participant in the slave trade, but of course other European nations had, and there were probably a few black African slaves in England. That country would come to benefit financially from slaving voyages soon enough under the rule of Henry's daughter, Elizabeth I, who would publicly decry John Hawkins' first slaving expedition but invest in later ones. She would also issue a proclamation ejecting "blackamoors" from England (Fryer 10-12). As Mayor Livingstone emphasized in his apology, England went on to build an infrastructure with the profits accrued from slaving. Given Elizabeth's proclamation, most Englanders of the day did not witness firsthand the inhumanity of black enslavement. Elizabeth herself did maintain at least two black servants, but John Black/Blancke was long gone by her day, leaving new trumpeters to herald Hawkins' court appearances.

The role of a black African in musical representation of early modern English identity is particularly fascinating in the context of five words later appropriated from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Richard Wright, in his essay "The Literature of the Negro in the United States," included in *White Man, Listen* (1957), used Shakespeare's phrase "the forms of things unknown" to characterize deeply-imbedded cultural vestiges that perpetrators of chattel slavery were unable to touch in their campaign to erase their captives' histories. Stephen Henderson went on to borrow the five words for the title of his introduction to *Understanding The New Black Poetry: Black Speech & Black Music As Poetic References* (1972). Wrote Henderson, "Black people are moving toward the Forms of Things Unknown, which is to say, toward Liberation" (69).

Since the 1970s, the words have become instantly recognizable in the sub-field of African-American literature, where they trumpet courses and seminars. Shakespeare wrote the words as Hawkins set about enslaving Africans, and Shakespeare as literary icon became part of the British imperialist curriculum taught to descendents of those slaves. Yet somehow the words came to affirm the literary identity of American descendents of African slaves. Black/Blancke's music represented beneficiaries of a court culture that devalued him, but words from Shakespeare, who became affiliated with the courts of Elizabeth and James, came to stand for the indefatigable spirit of Americans descended from black African slaves. Art can be spun into healing circles.

Chief among the remaining shards of African culture that Wright, Henderson, and others described as "the forms of things unknown" were elements of music. Perhaps these elements were maintained in songs, but since slaveholders forbade slaves to use African languages, original lyrics must have been lost relatively quickly. Yet extra-lingual aspects of culture remained in the music itself. Habib Koite, a popular African musician and musicologist of today, identifies one of these aspects as a relationship between notes he claims as indigenous to Mali, the region of Africa where he grew up. This intervallic relationship is commonly known by Western musicians as the blues scale, a substructure of "American" musical forms including blues and jazz.

Ambiguous signifiers can be powerful unifying tools: a sound some listeners claim as American can be identified and claimed by others as African, or Malian. Koite recently took American singer/songwriter/guitarist Bonnie Raitt along on a tour of Africa. When asked what Africans in his home region thought of Raitt, he says with a laugh, "they thought she was white." But the sound of her music, based on elements originating in Africa, transcended barriers of race, nation, and language, and Malians appreciated and accepted Raitt's musical contribution. Music can function as a compass with which to inscribe those healing circles of art.

Artists struggle with categorical oppositions as they seek to define themselves, and they do something similar for those who appreciate their art. Defining a specific postcolonial aesthetic, Dawes considers the importance of differentiating Jamaican from American postcolonial musical identity. In "New Sounds," the poem that opens *Natural Mysticism*, we watch through young Kwame's eyes as his father, Neville Dawes, removes Duke Ellington (who, incidentally, composed musical settings for Shakespeare) from the turntable and spins Bob Marley in his place. This, writes Dawes, is "how the Duke got schooled by a thug" (12). While from one perspective Ellington participated in the recovery of African forms of things unknown, in Dawes' poem he represents an institutionalized identity that could stifle an emergent one. Thugs can become dukes and then must be usurped. Calibans can become Prosperos and then must be challenged, just as Shakespeare himself, identified by his contemporary Robert Greene as an "upstart crow," eventually became a symbol of British imperialism and had to be reckoned with in a number of ways.

The attempt to balance self-definition, artistic or otherwise, against exclusion and hegemony is not new, and it has been a point of controversy in literary studies for

decades. As a Shakespearean, the big question that *Requiem* raises for me has to do with commonality, essentialism, and the concept of a human condition. For at least twenty years English cultural materialists and American new historicists have dominated critical views in Shakespeare studies. Literary scholars of these two schools, the best-known of whom are England's Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield and the United States' Stephen Greenblatt, have allied against the concept of a "human condition." Their position stems from the assumption that "essentialist thought" upon which to construct such a "condition" was not available to the inhabitants of early modern England.

I understand fully the degree to which these scholars mean well and to which they react against a long-bandied-about generalized connection between Shakespeare and humanity. Their argument that there can be no one human nature is based on the concept that all is social construct and that no two cultures fashion humanity in the same way. Their point is to preserve and protect the concept of cultural difference. But might there be a way to do so while reinforcing commonalities rather than accentuating difference? One of the few dissenting voices in this Shakespearean brouhaha belongs to Robin Headlam Wells, who argues that early moderns did indeed believe in a human condition and that trends in the sciences today verify the veracity of that position (1-5). Outside of Shakespeare studies, Edward Said advocated for a broad approach to humanity in citing the need for "the reintegration of all those people and cultures, once confined and reduced to peripheral status, with the rest of the human race" (162). Dawes' project, in confronting the historical reality of African slavery through a variety of art forms, moves toward a non-essentializing reintegration.

Said insisted upon the necessity of testifying to historical oppression, but he argued that this testimony is insufficient "unless that history is redirected into intellectual process and universalized to include all sufferers" (165). Dawes moves toward this redirection in closing "Land Ho," *Requiem*'s final poem, with the description of a voyage's end, a collective straightening of backs, and a type of unity transcending language:

> I cannot speak the languages
> Spoken in that vessel,
> Cannot read the beads
> Promising salvation.
> I know this only,

> That when the green of land
> Appeared like light
> After the horror of this crossing,
>
> We straightened our backs
> And faced the simplicity
> Of new days with flame. (46)

Embodied in the straightening of backs is the retaining of a cultural self expressible in musical sound; Dawes configures this expression as the singing of "laments so old, so true." The musical seed that crossed the Atlantic with the captives on these vessels proved so fertile that once in the soil of the enslavers' homeland, it sprouted, flourished, and was grafted onto American identity. Yet if "we"—not just the descendents of slaves with whom the speaking persona of Dawes' poem identifies, but people of diverse origins—are ever to straighten our backs and recover from the ongoing effects of the middle passage—if apologies for past atrocities are to become more than empty words—we must nurture intercultural commonalities where we can find them.

Music can simultaneously bind and separate. It can cement Jamaicans as a nation while differentiating them from other united peoples. It can unite white American Bonnie Raitt with black Africans who recognize her adoption of their own cultural history while allowing Raitt and Koite to operate within separate musical forms claimed as definitive elements of two distinct cultures. African listeners would not have had the opportunity to hear unifying musical commonalities had Koite and Raitt not agreed to collaborate: music unifies most effectively as part of a conscious effort. Appropriately, then, the epigraph that opens Dawes' *Requiem* calls for conscious participation.

It comes from Bob Marley's "Redemption Song": "Won't you help to sing/ These songs of freedom/ 'Cause all I ever had/ Redemption songs." The active participation that Marley calls for—the helping to sing—facilitates movement toward his imperative: "Got to fulfill the book." Whose book? Which book? Shakespeare? The *King James Bible*—assembled by a royally-sanctioned committee as England ramped up its role in slave-driven colonization? Books can be appropriated, whether by Rastafarians establishing Haile Selassie's divinity with Old Testament verses, or by Caribbean poets and African American literary critics laying groundwork for postcolonial literary identities

upon the hijacked words of England's national playwright. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in considering the question, "Who are 'we?'" for the field of comparative literature, exclaims: "let literature teach us that there are no certainties, that the process is open, and that it may be altogether salutary that it is so" (26). It is indeed salutary, because fulfilling uncertain books becomes a matter of choice, and helping Marley and Dawes sing songs of freedom can be part of that choice. Seemingly small personal choices can resound loudly in the public realm of identity formation. So I have chosen to write a trumpet line into one of the pieces for *Requiem*. It is a tucket that announces the presence of John Black/Blancke, and I hope to hear it played in London.

Notes

1 See, among many others, Cartelli, Erickson 41-60, Hulme and Sherman 220-35, Loomba, and Vaughan and Vaughan 144-171.

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