FULFILLING THE BOOK:
SHAKESPEARE, MUSIC,
IDENTITY, AND KWAME
DAWES’ REQUIEM
AN ESSAY

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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/Blanche. 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/Blanche'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/Blanche'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/Blanche 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 Englishers 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 descendants of those slaves. Yet somehow the words came to affirm the literary identity of American descendants 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 intervillic 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" (g2). 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 Proserpors 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 (r-s).

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" (662). 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" (669). 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,
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." 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/Blanke, 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.

Works Cited


