

## Article

# Mythological Recuperation and Performance as Agency for Genealogical Return in Djanet Sears's *Afrika Solo*

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**Abstract:** This paper is an examination of Djanet Sears's *Afrika Solo* (1990) as a unique example of how Blacks in the global diaspora trace their genealogical roots back to Africa. Drawing from research in anthropology, cultural studies, and performance, the paper purports that Sears's African-Canadian identity is underlined by her recuperation of a heritage, epistemes and performative aesthetics, and, real or imagined, practices that are not just Afrocentric but specifically Yoruba. Essentially, the paper examines *Afrika Solo* in the context of Black Aesthetic and more significantly as "text" in a Yoruba sense, which constitutes her own way of "going back to get it." The paper is divided into two parts: the first part presents a general argument about Sears's journey back to Africa and the culturally-rooted nature of the performance as opposed to feminist/gender readings of same, while the second part explores ways of understanding the play through the lens of Yoruba ritual and its aesthetics.

**Keywords:** culture; Ifá; ritual; Sankofa; Sears

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## Background: Understanding the Difference in a "Different" Aesthetic Tradition

I was in West Africa and we were getting ready to go into Mali when we went through a town called Djanet. It seemed like I had discovered a little part of myself so I made it mine.

(Sears, Interview with Breon 2012)

In light of Yoruba (of southwest Nigeria) ritual and performative aesthetics, and as an example of the Sankofan spirit of "going back to get it," this essay examines the African-Canadian multiple award-winning playwright, performer, and director, Djanet Sears's a one-woman performance, *Afrika Solo*, in which she dramatizes her journey to Africa, a performance that she describes as her "autobiomythography" ("Afterwards"). *Afrika Solo* "begins with a reenactment of the Middle Passage, a powerful rendition of the forced movement that led to the enslavement of blacks throughout the African diaspora" (Brown-Guillory 2006, pp. 155–56). Born in London to Jamaican and Guyanese parents, and moved at age fifteen to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, Sears (the protagonist of the performance) recalls being called "nigger" by her classmate, and told to "go back to where you come from" (Sears 1990, pp. 36–38). Sears recalls that as the only black girl in her school, she was molested by her mates who asked to touch her hair; her teacher treated her with contempt because of her skin color; and a particular landlord from she tried to rent a room some years later also insulted her because of her race. According to Sears.

I grew up in a society where I was considered a minority, minor, inferior, and somewhere along the line, I developed a type of internalized oppression. Although the ways in which each of us experiences internalized oppression are unique, no black person in this society has been spared. 'Internalized racism' has been the primary means by which we have been forced to perpetuate and 'agree' to our own oppression (1990).

Sears experienced both the hardship and complexity of her place, both as an immigrant and a black person, in Canada that is noted for her history of racial discrimination. Block and Galabuzi (2011) in a study, decry the role that both racism and skin color play in the uneven nature of employment in Canada despite the country's unprecedented economic growth and an increased diverse population for which it prides itself as a multicultural society (pp. 1–20), while other scholars have explored the effects of slavery, racism, and exploitation on the lives of Black people and the deliberate neglect of their history and contributions to the development of Canada (Simmons 1998, p. 91; Mensah 2002, p. 44; Keizer 2004, p. 165). Contemporary black writers, and Sears in particular, have focused on slavery as a fit subject to articulate the difficult condition of the lives of Black people under racism and the dilemma of claiming home in the New World, "claiming home and . . . navigating this territory between where you've come from, and where you are" has always been a difficult question. "We are neither this nor that [ . . . ] we are both. I think it's hard to form one definite identity that is based on so many things . . . [A] lot of my work is about questioning home, and looking at this idea of what home means, whether it's in terms of literature or whether it's in terms of culture or cultural voice" (Sears qtd in Buntin 2004). The role of literature and other aesthetic endeavors in the articulation of the historical and political imperative of challenging racism through identity formation have been a subject that Deck (1992) explores. She stresses that.

We come from Jamaica, Trinidad, Barbados, Ghana, Haiti, Guyana, Nigeria, Canada, the United States and South Africa. As writers, we push the limits of literature and redefine images of representation. In the process, we create our realities. We are a new generation of griots—town criers, or spiritual messengers—whose stories have been transferred to the printed page. Despite the diversity of cultural backgrounds, we write out of a collective African consciousness—a consciousness embodied in the fabric of oral traditions, woven from one generation to the next, through rhythms, storytelling, fables, proverbs, rituals, worksongs and sermons meshed with Western literary forms. (p. xi)

Memory plays a crucial role in this task of reconstructing the past. "Memory is always re-call and re-collection," write Plate and Smelik (2013), which implies "re-turn, re-vision, re-enactment, re-presentation: making experiences from the past in the present again in the form of narratives, images, sensations, [and] performances" (p. 6). Nicholls (1994) argues that "past energies and events [often] erupt onto the scene of the present," and in doing so, they function as "a phantasmic space to be reinhabited and repossessed" (p. 199), as Gourdine (2003) who contends that Sears's performance should be read as an enactment of "the relationship between present and past locations: the geographical spaces we occupy, the cultural borders with which we place ourselves, and the intellectual positions we take" (p. xi). Whereas Olsen (2014) imagines that for such a journey to be successful, it ought only to be performed physically. For him, Sears's journey "turn[s] into a circular run whereby [the] travelers keep returning to the same place they started" (p. 138), whereas the journey is at once physical and metaphysical, and is marked by defining 'discoveries', including the renaming of herself as well as an encounter with performative resources that ultimately distinguish her oeuvre of works from others.

In returning to Africa in order to re-educate herself about, and reconnect with, her roots, Sears demonstrates her uniqueness among other Africans who were born, raised, and/or live in the diaspora. *Afrika Solo* is, thus, her powerful statement about the journey and her effort at "self-apprehension" (Soyinka 1976, p.xi), a fact that she articulates clearly, "the longing to tell one's story and the process of telling is symbolically a gesture of longing to recover the past in such a way that one experiences both a sense of reunion and a sense of release" (Sears 1990), which ultimately leads to self-discovery and a sense of identity; specifically, a Black identity. For Stuart Hall, performance of this type offers its audience what amounts to "the politics of representation," for identity is constructed "within not outside of representation." According to Hall (1996) "Identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not "who we are" or "where we have come from" (p. 4), in relation to where we are.

Previous examinations of Sears's work have focused on/centered the gender framing of Sears herself as an African-Canadian woman rather than her experience of racism, xenophobia, and othering, whereas these are salient issues Sears continues to experience, and it has been an important source of inspiration for her art. In the mixed reception which trailed Sears's most successful work, *Harlem Duet* (adaptation of *Othello*) through its movement from the periphery to the center of Canadian theatre, we have examples underlining this particular point about the central place of the issue of race and xenophobia in Sears's work, although the specific ways in which she uses cultural idioms to dramatize same has not always been addressed by scholars.<sup>1</sup>

In *Reading Materialist Theatre*, under the sub-heading of "how Shakespeare means at the Stratford Festival" with particular reference to *Harlem Duet* which was featured at the prestigious Stratford Shakespearean Festival, Knowles (2004) argues that both the material and ideological conditions of production and its reception often work against the "transformative potential of a particular script or production" (10, 106; emphasis in the original). Both the reaction of some of the cast of the play and the agenda of the Organizers' of the Stratford Festival are useful to this understanding. Alison Sealy-Smith who played Billie in the play stated excitedly in an interview, "We're involved in birthing a new aesthetic [...]. Some artists are concerned about where we should look for our models [...]. Others of us aren't concerned about the aesthetics [...]. If we just do, the result will be black Canadian theatre" (qtd in Kaplan 1997), similar to a reviewer, Chapman (1997), who thinks that the play is not just a "substantial achievement" but also "a powerful, fresh statement of familiar themes [...] that has special significance for black culture" (qtd in McKinnon, p. 140). In an interview on the play published later as "Othello in Three Times" Knowles (2002) is more forthright saying that "an adaptation of *Othello* that did not place race at centre stage would be unthinkable," just as Sears herself who says in the same interview, "Before *Harlem Duet*, Canadian Stage had never produced a work by an author of [Black] African descent. And the problem with Canadian Stage is that it's called Canadian Stage, and it represents Canada, and I'm thinking, 'I'm Canadian, so it must represent me'" (p. 30). The Stratford Festival Organizers' mandate of "diversity and inclusiveness" also appears to align favorably with Sealy-Smith and Sears's excited rhetoric, as well as those being expressed by some members of the Black theatre community that was already emerging in Toronto at that time.

The invitation extended to *Harlem Duet* to feature at Stratford as part of the Festival Organizers' policy of "cultural diversity," which encouraged and featured "a more ethnically diverse ensemble and producing plays that deal with ethnic and racial difference," is itself problematic, as is the fact that "the play has been constructed [through reviews, production notes and paratexts] in public discourse as a symbolic assault on racism, and as a triumph for an (increasingly) visible [Black] minority in a community that wants to see itself as multicultural" (p. 148), although as McKinnon argues, *Harlem Duet* succeeds at Stratford in doing what Sears sets out to achieve, namely, "work toward a world in which Black spectators can always find a play that appeals to them, and White spectators realize that not everyone can take this privilege for granted" (p. 166). But it is difficult to overlook the Festival Organizers' notion of catering through *Harlem Duet* for a "wide spectrum of humanity," an obvious racial undertone that was powerfully exposed by a White woman whose excited racist comment Sears also promptly responded to. Expressing how she thoroughly enjoyed *Harlem Duet*, the woman said, "This is not a Black play. This is an extraordinary human play!" to which Sears responded, "While I undoubtedly accepted the praise, I was struck by the idea that Black plays and human plays were completely different entities [...]. I mean, all Black plays are human plays! What part of the Black experience is not part of the human experience?" ("Festival Program Note", p. 10). Gary Smith, who engages both the play and its reception by the audience, is quoted as saying "There is little doubt the play is attracting black people to Stratford. The day I saw it the theatre was almost full and there were far more people of color than us pale-faced whites...It reminded me of the days in New

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, (Balogun 2017a).

York when I'd go to see the early plays of James Baldwin and sit in a theatre full of blacks who cheered that anti-white sentiments in Baldwin's drama, making me feel decidedly uncomfortable. So this is what it feels like to be in a minority I thought" (qtd in [McKinnon 2010](#), p. 163). While Evelyn Myrie's enthusiasm and excitement when *Harlem Duet* was featured at the Stratford Festival captures the play's significance among the Black community, "For the past few summers, I have made numerous unkept promises to myself to go to the Stratford Shakespearean Festival. It was Djanet Sears' new and exciting play that finally got me there... As we entered the theatre...we knew we were making history—we were on our way to see the first black work to be produced in the festival's 54-year history and the first to be directed by a black woman and the first with an all-black cast" (p. 163), her genuine enthusiasm contrasts sharply with the White woman's "universalist" assumption after the show.

In fact, such universalism that the White woman expressed is not just symptomatic of racism in Canada, but is itself the European attitude to art as argued by [Amini \(1972\)](#) who contends that "universalism is a highly functional definition used by Europeans who attempt to impose their cultural values on others. [In] the claim of "universality" racism is projected"; [Addison \(1972\)](#) also contends that the theme of universalism in European philosophy and aesthetics is used to debilitate and oppress other people and their culture, as [Ani \(1994\)](#) who argues tellingly that African-centered analysis of the works of people of African descent are useful not only in terms of its value but also in the way that it exposes the politics of European universalistic rhetoric (p. 226). In other words, any analysis of the arts of diasporic Africans (including Sears') that does not take into account their cultural reality and ways in which they have drawn inspiration from their past will only prove inadequate.

The extraordinary success of *Harlem Duet*, which premiered on 20 April 1997 at the Tarragon Extra Space and went on to be staged in more prestigious venues including Halifax (2000), New York (2002), Stratford Festival (2006), and St. Louis Black Repertory Theatre (2008), is a good example. Although judging by its reception few scholars have failed to notice how the play has transformed "from an independently-produced premiere production by a feminist theatre company in Toronto, into a celebrated, multiple-award-winning, anthologized play on the Stratford Stage in 2006" ([McKinnon 2010](#), p. 138), most readings have privileged its feminist/gender imperatives, and where issues of race are highlighted, the specific ways in which she has utilized African-centered resources in the play are hardly addressed.

I have discussed *Harlem Duet* extensively in order to show that its own reception was not very different from that of *Afrika Solo*, which serves as its precursor. For example, exploring the feminist assumptions of *Afrika Solo*, along with *Harlem Duet*, through the lens of Standpoint theory, and drawing at the same time from the works of [Harding \(2004\)](#), [Moser \(2008\)](#) engages how the play is "socially situated" (p. 11), but the cultural specifics are ignored. Standpoint theory often centers around women's lives; it is a kind of "organic epistemology, methodology, philosophy of science, and social theory that can arise whenever oppressed peoples gain public voice" ([Harding 2004](#), p. 3). Drawing on Standpoint's focus and its spontaneous appeal to groups around the world "seeking to understand themselves and the world around them in ways blocked by the conceptual frameworks dominant in their culture" (p. 3), Moser argues that while *Afrika Solo* is an early attempt by Sears, driven mainly by "a performer's charisma and drive", *Harlem Duet* is "a sophisticated, highly crafted, mature drama" distinguished by the focus on "personal history to literary re-visioning, from playwright-driven solo performance to counter-canonical text-cum domestic drama" (p. 239). Although Moser claims to identify similar foregrounding of "performatively constructed models of identities in the two plays", which are models based on "local bodies of knowledge and contingent framing of truths" (p. 239), she neglects to mention or discuss exactly what these "local bodies of knowledge" are in terms of what the audience needs to know or do not already know.

[Acampora \(2007\)](#), in "On Making and Remaking", presents an analysis that departs from Moser's. Although she also recognizes the place of feminist/gender hierarchies and their place in the works of Black female artists, she places the discourse of same in the context of specific cultural reality that Black Aesthetics and philosophy foreground. According to Acampora, "one of the ways in which persons

of color, but equally *women of color*, have effected an *unmaking* of the face that marks them as female and gives them racial particularity is through their cultural productions in which they aesthetically transform the values that have been used to stain them as inferior, deficient, and defective" (p. 2; emphasis in the original). In what she calls "aesthetic agency", Acampora highlights the difference in Black Aesthetics compared to the Western notion of art, especially ways in which performances by women of color offer new interpretive schema that problematizes place but centers Africa, how the performances and their cultural idioms are unique to Black people's idea of place and home, similar to the arguments powerfully put forward by many African scholars.

Kariamuw Welsh Asante has also argued that "criteria established for the purposes of measuring the value and significance of works of art as they relate to aesthetics must take into account the personal reflection of the entire nation. The historical and social mirror cannot be overlooked. In fact, the particular reflection of the ethnic groups, as well as the collective reflection of the nation must be considered" ("Commonalities in African Dance"). Using Negro Folk Music as a point of reference, Courlander (1963) makes a similar assertion that although Africans have absorbed and learned from the dominant culture in which they found themselves as a consequence of the Slave Trade, it is difficult to imagine that they "would forget everything they knew and become a vacuum into which the attributes of another culture could be poured at will" (pp. 3–4).<sup>2</sup> Sears's performance can be classified generally into Black Aesthetics in which, as Elam and Krasner (2001) argue, "black theater, drama, and performance, past and present, interact and enact continuous social, cultural, and political dialogues" covering such diverse areas as "Social Protest and the Politics of Representation, Cultural Traditions, Cultural Memory, and Performance, and the intersections of Race and Gender," some or all of which coalesce to create "cultural memory" that is, "those collective memories that are culturally constructed over time and whose meanings are historically and culturally determined." In performing race and gender, which are two of the key issues in Sears's *Afrika Solo*, Black Aesthetics of the type that her play subscribes to, ultimately "negotiate systems of power, cultural and social mores, values, and beliefs" (pp. 3–9), even as they engage with social and cultural codes, as well as with cultural memory.

Moreover, any meaningful analysis of Sears's performance in *Afrika Solo* must take into account the significant transformation that took place in her life on her journey back to Africa, a transformation that is underlined by both her change of name from Janet to Djanet, to the use of African-centered traditional motifs that are apparent in her performance but are hardly explored beyond a passing mention. In the opinion of Benston (1982), this self-reflective act of renaming "represented a break with the traumatic past and the affirmation of a newly found economic and social freedom" (p. 2), and renaming of this type, argues Kristeva (1969), "lay[s] bare the complex signifying process that makes a genotext emerge as a phenotext" (p. 281), where "'Genotext' refers to signifying infiniteness, and 'Phenotext' considers the text as a fact" (Ganapathy-Doré 2013, p. 20). As Geetha Ganapathy-Doré further writes, although 'playing' with names is a common feature of many authors who transmute life into fiction, Sears's renaming of herself is clearly an example of autogenesis in which "the individual came into being by re-embodying [herself] in a new name that endowed [her] with a different lineage" even as the name functions as a "metonym for culture" (pp. 15–19). Although the trio of Benston, Kristeva, and Ganapathy-Doré presents what amounts to "metonymy for culture" in the way that they describe variously the concept of (re)naming, the explanations are still not adequate to express fully its cultural connotation. Kuwabong (2014) shows that diasporic Africans explore "elements of epic and

<sup>2</sup> Courlander is even more specific about both the locations and those traditions that Sears and many diaspora artists recuperate, "[Various] elements of African-derived custom, including attitudes and values, which are visible today in the United States [and elsewhere], even in subtle or disguised forms [are traceable to] the Yoruba, the Fon people of Dahomey, the Ashanti, and various other tribes of West Africa [with their] highly developed religious systems, complex systems of law and equity, pride of history and tradition, a high order of arts and crafts, music and dance, a vast oral literature ranging from proverbs to epics, moral and ethical codes . . . and complex systems of social organization" (p. 5).



myth” as veritable “praxes that affirm their Afrisporic (a word coined by Kuwabong) worldview” in their search for “cultural [and historical] liberation” (pp. 1–3). Although scholars generally agree that *Harlem Duet* is a success both theatrically and commercially, including the gender and race dynamics that it engages similar to *Afrika Solo* (Knowles 1998; Thieme 2003; McKinnon 2014), they have not shown how both plays are explicitly connected in terms of an African-rooted aesthetic, or the ways in which Sears’s renaming of herself and the name which she gives her characters in the plays could be read. Specifically, they have not shown how Sears’s recuperation of her African heritage and aesthetic resources capture what Moser struggles to explain as a way of “entertain[ing] epistemological shifts from what [the audience] already know.” Kuwabong’s observation that diaspora artistes like Sears “engage their diasporic imaginaries and rhetorics of retrievals to enact narratives of performance that seek to erase any inner contradictions about Africa” (p. 14), represents such epistemological shifts.

Furthermore, central to these aforementioned features is mythology, which contains collective “practical wisdom of Africans in the African continent and in the Diaspora,” and which allows [the artistes] to undergo “performative transformations” (p. 4). The cultural content of Sears’s (re) naming of herself is one that must be understood in relation to her performance, which should also be approached under the rubrics of “text” (itself a product of mythology) in a Yoruba sense. Sears’s renaming of herself embodies a significant ritual in a Yoruba sense. For *àjò/ìrìnàjò* [journey], which she describes and performs in the play, is not just any ordinary, metaphorical concept in Yoruba thought meaning “a movement forward” but rather suggestive of what in *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency*, Drewal (1992) describes as “an act of transformation, a progression which highlights the experiential, reflexive nature of day-to-day living” (p. 33), that necessarily starts from the moment one is born and is given a name in accordance with stipulated tradition. Included in such a journey are diverse emotions and characteristics such as actual/virtual travel from one place to another, including a return, new experiences, joy and hardships along the route, items for further contemplation and reflection, and presumed growth or progress as overall gain (p. 37), in a variety of ways.

While Sears uses the performance to underline her racial identity as a Black person and a woman, through her own form of Black Aesthetics, it is more culturally-specific to read the performance as “text” in a Yoruba ritual and aesthetics sense, by drawing from the research by scholars working in the field of anthropology, cultural studies, and Yoruba performance. I will argue that *Afrika Solo*, not only establishes Sears’s African roots but that she also draws heavily from that milieu of experience. The performance can thus be considered on the one hand as an “epistemological verbal performance” through Sears’s telling of stories about herself and her (African) community (Love 2012, p. 10) and on the other hand, as “text” in the Yoruba sense since “... as ‘performance theory’ has demonstrated, all oral texts should be thought of as action rather than object, as process rather than pattern. They are fully realised only in the moment of performance” (Barber 1991, p. 7). Karin Barber’s assertion connects favorably with Esiaba Irobi’s, which I discuss fully in the next section.

In articulating ways of viewing Yoruba verbal (as well as performative) art and textuality, (Barber 1999) argues that, “We need to presume that textuality itself is culturally specific: that there are different ways of being “text,” and that genres recognized as distinct within a given cultural field may nevertheless share a common textuality. To grasp the specific aesthetic mode of any verbal art, then, we need to understand how it is marked, and constituted, as text” (p. 17). In “In Praise of Metonymy” Yai (1993) addresses the discursive and dialogic aspects of both the verbal and physical arts in his examination of Yoruba textuality, stressing its place as an essential knowledge of Yoruba attitude to their verbal and performative art. According to Yai, “Yoruba mode of artistically engaging reality and their way of relating to one another, to the orisa, and other cultures is more metonymic than metaphoric” (p. 113). In other words, unlike the Western dichotomizing approach to performance, as shown by previous analyses of Sears’s work which privilege the gender/feminist perspective but exclude the totality of her experience, Yoruba attitude stresses totality and the integration of self and community, “infinite metonymic difference and departure, and not a summation for sameness and imitation,” about the “relationship of the self to the rest of the world, and of the departure [which] exists

within multiple realms of coexistence such as the intellectual, the religious, the political, the practical, etc.” (p. 113), much of which the Yoruba Ifa embodies, both as “text” and as performance in view of its centrality to Yoruba ritual and its aesthetic, a point of reference that is useful to understanding Sear’s play, as discussed fully in the next section.

Two essentially Yoruba features of myth are peculiar to both *Harlem Duet* and *Afrika Solo: itàn* [Yoruba word for story, narrative, and history, all of which Sears’s oeuvre of works incorporates] and *iran*, both of which constitute significant Yoruba ritual in this sense and my idea of “text” which also represents what I think Kuwabong must have had in mind when he talks about “myth” and “the practical wisdom of Africa” in the diaspora. Drewal shows the interconnection between *itàn* and *iran*, a term that is synonymous to “spectacle” and/or “performance” in its simplest conception, “the Yoruba often use ritual, festival, spectacle, and play interchangeably [ . . . ] so that any generic distinctions have to acknowledge that, as categories of performance, they are open and inclusive rather than close and exclusive” (p. 12) in their realization. In their openness and inclusiveness, Yoruba performance accommodates foreign materials, for the “Yoruba conceive of their history as diaspora” writes Yai, in an exchange that is “characterised by a dialogic ethos, a constant prurit to exchange idea and experience and material culture” underlined by their conception of *itàn* as story and/or narrative, and the more advanced form, history (p. 31). Eliot (1932) has written that history often times functions as a motivating element in creativity. Eliot argues that the historical sense not only of the pastness of past, but of its presences “compels a (wo)man to write not merely with her/his own generation in her/his bones, but with a feeling of . . . a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together . . . And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of her/his place in time, of her/his own contemporaneity” (pp. 14–15). The significance of Eliot’s synthesis of the past, present, and future, argues Said (1994), is the appeal of the past which is a veritable strategy of interpreting the present, “what animates such appeals is not only disagreement about what happened in the past and what the past was, but uncertainty about whether the past really is past, over and concluded, or whether it continues, albeit in different forms” (p. 3), to the extent that it warrants such a contemplation.

History as story and/or narrative that is most fully expressed in the Ifá liturgy, the supreme body of Yoruba narrative and idea of “text”, helps the Yoruba to overcome such uncertainty. Through that means they elaborate their idea of politics, for example, with emphasis on the hegemonic behavior of people such as in the perpetuation of, and the reaction to, racism. That sense of *itàn* as story and/or narrative and history is clear in *Harlem Duet*, in which Sears addresses the issue of racism by showing how Black people respond to its political and emotional dimensions in different ways through the story of Billie and Othello’s failed relationship, and in *Afrika Solo* where she narrates her own personal experience of xenophobia. In his study of diasporic Yoruba living in Toronto, Adeyanju (2006) discovers how the people use local lores, history, tradition, mores, and cultural complexities (all of which are categories under the label of *itàn*) in order to combat racism (pp. 257–58). It follows then to argue that Sears uses *itàn* to examine the complex issue of racism in *Harlem Duet*, *itàn* that takes a cyclical format following a Yoruba sense of time rather than its Western conception. That is why she starts her narration in the past, “in 1928, in Harlem at the corner of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X boulevards” and goes further back to “1860 Harlem on the steps to a blacksmith’s forge” while the central point of the narrative is set in present-day Harlem (Sears 2002, p. 289). Sears also uses characterization to underline the cyclical nature (and fusion) of the story/narrative and history for the two characters who play Othello and Billie also play HE and SHE and HIM and HER in the different time frames of the *itàn*.

Along with *itàn*, *Afrika Solo* (as well as *Harlem Duet*) is predicated on the masterful handling of *iran* or spectacle, whose categorization also includes ‘play’ and ‘improvisation’ which are “overlapping and interpenetrating” concepts among the Yoruba. Drewal maintains that *iran* as spectacle, entails repetition and transformation, features shared by Sear’s plays and, particularly, entailed by *Afrika Solo*, for an analysis of *iran* from its root verb “*ranti* (*ran eti*) = to remember; *ranfa* (*ran Ifa*) = to recite

Ifa verses; and *ranse* (*ran* ise) = to send a message via a messenger” shows the dimension of *iran* as reality which “until revealed by knowledgeable actors, is inaccessible to human experience” (p. 13). While *Afrika Solo*’s resemblance of the first is clear, I shall present its demonstration of the second and third conception as outlined by Drewal in the next section. On the one hand, while chronicling her coming into consciousness by using her own journey to Africa as a point of reference, Sears’s performance in *Afrika Solo* also alternates between narration and action in terms of Yoruba performance (“text” as narrative and as performance) that allows room for individual choice; and on the other hand by “blurring the line between the subject/object divide through foregrounding of her own perspective on her experience” (Moser 2008, p. 241), the play also conforms to Yoruba spectacle in which the subject and object positions are continually integrated. The criteria for spectacle by MacAloon (1984) also applies to *Afrika Solo* with regards to its embodiment of *iran* in the sense of its portrayal of “the primacy of visual sensory and symbolic codes, monumentality and an aggrandizing ethos, and dynamism of a performance that engenders excitement from the audience” (pp. 243–44). In this sense, I consider how Sears interacts with her audience through the style of narration and performance that she adopts. In the next section, I discuss fully the ways in which *Afrika Solo* could be understood as “text” in a Yoruba ritual and aesthetic sense.

### Performing the (Un)known: Sears’s Return to Her Roots in *Afrika Solo*

There is a strong cultural continuity between Africa and its diaspora, writes Courlander, a continuity that is marked by music and lore and an “unmistakable evidence of a large and significant oral literature” of an African origin, and “a deep-rooted tradition of music and dancing, both secular and religious” with evidence of these tributary cultural streams found in the repertoire of many diaspora artistes (pp. 9–10). In Sears’s case, she returns to the source to “partake” in the full expression of such traditional lore that Courlander describes eloquently. She remembers witnessing on her journey to Africa a unique performance and aesthetic tradition. According to Sears.

They ’d be telling some traditional story in a language I did not know. It was in a local language, not the colonial language [ . . . ] and this story, which everybody knew apparently, was told by the narrator poet, but it was told in parts by dancers, and singers and musicians who told the story—sometimes better, and sometimes separately! (Breon 2012)

Sears refers to this performative trope that she witnessed as the “Sundiata Form” a traditional West African form of theatre which consists of a story being told through narrative, music, and dance. She also mentions how she blends this particular aesthetic trope that she renamed “the living set” or “the Chorus,” in *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God* (Sears 2003), where it functions as a cultural marker to show the link to her [and her characters’] African ancestry in the play. According to Sears, the origin of the “CHORUS of ancestors,” or the “living set” should be traced to its origin in Africa.

The concept of the ‘living set’ came early in the writing process, and became fundamental to the inclusion of the West African theatrical tradition that I first saw in Benin, where music, story (text) and choreographed movement are presented as parts of one form. The chorus culturally connects the African diasporic tradition in Canada to those in Africa and opens the audience to the creation of both a natural and a mystical world. It also connected me to the many worlds in which I stand (1990).

Although Petropoulos (2008) is right when she says that “the Chorus” represents for Sears, “‘the people’ both past and present,” and that they also serve as “the community’s living and breathing ancestral ties to the Canadian soil” (p. 78), she neglects to mention the cultural rootedness in Yoruba soil of that aesthetic trope. For I will argue that Sears meant the Yoruba, and how the Yoruba culture has influenced her outlook and craft: whether it is Benin (a city in Nigeria that is also written ‘Bini’) which shares both mythological belief, historical and cultural boundaries, and connection with the Yoruba, or Benin Republic (Nigeria’s closest neighbor on the West African coastline), whose social and



ritual practices have been influenced by Yoruba tradition<sup>3</sup>, Sears must have meant Yoruba aesthetic practice, which is noted for drawing extensively from the people's epistemology and worldview, and which writers either at home in Nigeria or its global diaspora often utilize in their dramaturgy (See: Courlander 1963; Yai 1993; Irobi 2009; Balogun 2017b).

Olatunji (1979) describes more elaborately what Sears recalls above of her experience in Benin. He stresses the vibrant reactive relationship (or dialectics) which subsists between the Yoruba oral artist and the audience before whom s/he performs, a performance that is fully realized with music, song, and dance, "the repetitions that engender audience participation and group solidarity, the poet's comments in response to a wink, a gesture, the coming in of a member of the audience or the message from the master drummer . . . are significant within the setting of performance, drum, dance, and drama" (p. 113). As Ong (1982) also observes, "words acquire their meanings only from their always insistent actual habitat, which is not, as in dictionary, simply other words, but includes also gestures, vocal reflections, facial expressions, and the entire human existential setting in which the real, spoken words always occurs" (p. 47); similar to Sears, Olatunji underscores the fusion of *itàn* and *ìran* and, more importantly, the primacy of the spoken word, the "text" which is both a living, and indeed mainstream, not marginal form, but key to the noetic world of the Yoruba.

Similar to "The Theory of Ase" in which he articulates Black aesthetics and Black performative interpretive schema that recognize fully the Yoruba performance paradigm through an examination of the works of August Wilson, Ntozake Shange, and Djanet Sears, Esiaba Irobi (2014)'s "Taking the Bull by the Horns" is also useful to explore the philosophical underpinning of Sears's performance in African aesthetic tradition different from the gender/feminist reading that it has received from Western scholars. Using as a template of analysis the Yoruba oral form, *oríkì*, Irobi argues for the recognition of the dual patrimony of African and African diaspora artistes, as heir(ess) to the theory of Black culture and Black vernacular tradition. For him, *oríkì* functions as "an oral, embodied and performative construct as well as an instance of enactment, re-enactment, spirituality and community." Irobi contends that there is in existence, "a body of performance theories that are African in conception and expression which have been excluded from contemporary intellectual discourses by both African and Western scholars because of the dominance of typography and European languages as primary media of instruction, scholarship and validation in the Western academy" (p. 174). In particular, Irobi articulates how Yoruba oral resource functions in the diaspora as "the primary polysemic infrastructure for encoding and transmitting history, performance traditions, identity, critical/theoretical discourses about art among most non-Western cultures and civilizations of the world" (p. 179). Hence, for him, *oríkì* could serve as "an enabling text which opens the door for the conflation of oral poetry, incantation, chant, spoken word, music, dance, enactment, community [and] audience engineering into a synthetic experience" (p. 201), in an atmosphere of intense and sensitive recollection.

Olabiyi Yai makes a similar call that, "When approaching Yoruba art, an intellectual orientation that would be more in consonant with Yoruba traditions of scholarship would be to consider each individual Yoruba art work and the entire corpus as *oríkì*" (pp. 29–30). As a concept and a discursive practice, *oríkì* is inseparable from the concept and discursive practice of *itàn* [as well as *ìran*] for both are "members of a constellation of basic Yoruba concepts without the elucidation of which it is impossible to understand any aspect of Yoruba cultures" (p. 30), and also without which the intellectual tradition of the Yoruba cannot be fully grasped. Attempting an appraisal of *Afrika Solo* from this highly philosophical perspective is to affirm how Sears exposes on the one hand the racist interests that undermine the freedom of immigrants and especially Black people in Canada on the one hand, and how she expresses her humanity through the recuperation of traditions and cultural values on the other hand. As Acampora suggests, there are ways of "looking back" which constitute in their very

<sup>3</sup> Until the late 19th century the influence of the Oyo (Yoruba) Empire extended as far as Aja, Dahomey, and Whyddah in present day Benin Republic. Several aspects of their belief and ritual were subsequently influenced by the Yoruba tradition and, as of today, Nigerians and mostly Yoruba account for about 42% of the total population of the country.

essentiality legitimate sites of contestation which, in Sears's case, one glimpses in her transformation of language (music, the "living set", "the Chorus" etc.) and the reformation of her identity (her body and mode of dressing) (p. 8), all of which she is able to achieve through the exploration of her African cultural and creative resources.

Spoken word becomes for Sears a vital tool of articulation of difference and formal discourse. In using words, that is, her narration, and drawing her audience into her world as well, Sears assumes multiple roles: (1) a diviner [recall here both Yai's idea of *oríkì* and Drewal's reference to *iran* and agency] who leads her/his client(s) from the state of unknown into the known, and (2) an oral artiste whose rendition is accompanied by music and symbolic body transformation. As the former, Sears positions herself to her audience in such a way that she now "plays" the role of a Babaláwo (Diviner),<sup>4</sup> whose encounter with a client during the Ifá divination process starts from the state of unknown and moves to revelation (the known) through the use of the *OpónIfá* (Divination tray) and divination instruments (either *ikin* [sacred nuts] or *òpèlè* [divination chain] as well as the *iróké* [divination tapper]), and whose liturgy (text)—*odù* or *esèIfá* (verse)—often comes across as Yoruba literature and performance in which two worlds are presented: the world of reality that is recognizable to our own experience as conceived through the fictional characters in the liturgy and whose thoughts and actions may be aligned with recognizable historical figures; and a surreal or metaphysical world that is inhabited by characters shaped in the mould of the *Òrìsà*.

As already explained by scholars working in the field of anthropology and cultural studies, Ifá is the most profound of all Yoruba divination systems either at home in Yorubaland of Nigeria or its global diaspora (Bascom 1969; Abimbola 1977; Peek 1991; Payne 1992). Ifá is noted for its extensive corpus of divination orature, which forms an important part of present-day Yoruba-based religious expressions globally and which also represents the most comprehensive articulation of the Yoruba epistemology, including its aesthetics, the interpretation of which renders intelligible the actions and desires of the supernatural forces for clients seeking answers to problems and concerns. The aesthetic significance of the *odù* or *esèIfá* is contained in their textual and performative characteristics: textual because the *odù* are "established" narratives which are "opened" and "read" by the Babaláwo (diviner) based on some "esoteric" graphic marks that he inscribes on the *Opón Ifá*; and performative because the Babaláwo literally assumes both the role of "*Òpitàn*" (storyteller/"narrative-hatcher") and the "*Olùtumò*" ("unraveler" of plots) who deciphers and disseminates the social and religious significance of the "divine" lyric through a comparison of the patterns or images that he has created on the *OpónIfá* (Adeeko 1998). Sears plays this role of "*Òpitàn*" and "*Olùtumò*" in the way she takes her audience on a retrospective journey into her childhood, dramatizes the challenges of growing up in a new environment, and celebrates her eventual triumph and establishment as a formidable writer and performer.

Contrary to feminist/gender assumptions that are though present in the play, then, what drives the performance is its nature as "text" through its incorporation of "myths, rhythms, and cosmic sensibilities" (Harrison 1974, p. 5). While Sears plays the role of the diviner/performer, the divining mat symbolically becomes her performance arena—the stage. In an exclusively functionalist sense, Marcuzzi (1999) argues that, "the divining mat becomes the social space whereby truth is authorized, an effective course of action is determined, and the primary epistemology of the community of believers is articulated"; it is also the place where performer and the performing arena are linked by elements of the culture. As *oríkì*, and "text", therefore, Sears's performance represents one aspect of Yoruba "metalingual constructs, as performance texts, contain[ing] within their complex configurations theoretical concepts and discourses about history, politics, identity and race that predate the colonial

<sup>4</sup> Sears could be seen as an *Ìyánífá* (the female counterpart of the Babalawo) who uses for divination such paraphernalia as *agbigbà*, *èrèrindínlógún*, and *isà*.

moment" (Irobi 2011, p. 180) in the way that she also blends music, chant, and poetry for "enchantment" and effective communication of her ideas.

Sears begins *Afrika Solo* with what she calls "The Incantation" which is a blend of music produced by an orchestra ensemble and a chorus that chants/sings in an African dialect that recalls Irobi's description of an "indigenous [Yoruba] initiatory and mythopoeic acting style" that includes elements of "'entrancement' and 'possession'" (p. 201). Traditional Yoruba ritual/performance always begin with the "Incantation," called the *ijúbà*, "an oral, embodied and performative construct as well as an instance of enactment, re-enactment, spirituality and community" (p. 182), mostly rendered in esoteric dialogue and music. In his discussion of the structure of traditional Yoruba performance (and in particular the *Alàrinjò*, the travelling theatre) Adedeji (1981) identifies the centrality of *ijúbà*—what he describes variously as "opening glee," the "pledge", and "salute"—as the troupe leader's way of "acknowledging the lineage from which he drew his inspiration or received training." The entire performance also rests on the strength of the Chorus (called *akùnyùgbà*), which supplies the "song element" and forms the vital link to understanding the central idea of the plot and the performance; additionally, there is the Orchestra, a combination of Yoruba drums with mythological origins that supports the poetry of the rendition and furnishes it with a life-line; the Drama aspect which includes "Spectacle" a solo performance by the lead performer usually the troupe leader; and the "Revue", a medley that combines cosmic sketches, music, and dancing and especially audience interaction (pp. 238–42); all of which are performative elements similar to the structure of Sears's *Afrika Solo*, although she adds to her own ensemble the combination of reggae and calypso in order to recall, and to connect to, the memory of her parents and roots (we should recall that her parents are Jamaican and Guyanese of African descent).

In discussing the centrality of Yoruba ritual practice to the evolvment of *tratado*, the musical aspect of the religious tradition of Cuban Lukumí, one of the many religious traditions founded from Yoruba ritual and venerated throughout the United States and Spanish Caribbean, Canada, Germany, Spain, and Italy, and its relationship with Bata music, Ifá divination and Orisa worship, Marcuzzi stresses how "the musicians interpret, interact with, or manipulate formal musical structures and lyrical texts to create a synergetic conjecture whereby all 'texts' and ritual intent intersect" (p. 75). He mentions that this essentially ritual content of *tratado* can, in principle, be applied to mundane performances such as Sear's "*ijúbà*" where improvisation mixes freely with musical accompaniment that elaborates upon the "song text" while the "lead singer" [Sears] entices the audience. However, of importance to stress is how she uses the "Incantation" as the first point of "going back to get it", of aesthetically linking herself to her genealogical roots by connecting to her parents through the medium of music—reggae and calypso.

Moreover, that aspect of the performance also works on many other levels including showing how her own life's experience and frustration reflect the experiences of her diaspora kin, how it triggers her "revelation of identity" (Wasserman 2009, p. 86), even though the songs "muddle over each other, [to] create an aural explanation for Djanet's frustration and anger" (Bennett 1995, p. 21). In the performance, and through an intimate interaction with the audience who assumes the role of "a witness" to the unfolding event, Sears acknowledges her African identity both with song and body transformation. Sears tells the audience about the origin of her (new) name: Djanet which replaces Janet. She says, "The oasis town of Djanet. D. J. A. N. E. T. It means paradise in Arabic" (Sears 1990, p. 49). She does not fail to mention her romantic relationship with an African Prince, a certain Benoit Viton Akande. She also draws attention to the symbolism of her body in the multiple roles that she plays, "The base of my culture would be forever with me. And funny thing is, it always had been. In my thighs, my behind, my hair, my lips," and, indeed, "Inside my African soul/Is where I found light/That makes me feel right, makes me/Whole" (pp. 90–91). Echoing Shange (1977), Sears insists, "With the acceptance of the ethnicity of my thighs & my backside, came a clearer understanding of my voice as a woman & as a poet" (p.xv). The body, along with voice, is utilized to the fullest.

Strategically, Sears also introduces another African performative strategy by “dismantling” the constraints imposed on the proscenium. She breaks the fourth wall when she engages her audience directly in a game of “name—that—theme-song” through reference to popular TV science fiction shows, “I am a T.V. nut, no a T.V. addict,” and in response to a member of the audience’s remark she says, “You’re kidding? Oh, come on!” (pp. 22–24). In one person shows, writes Gilbert (1997), “the distance between performer and spectator seems somehow smaller regardless of the size of the auditorium” (p. 6). Tompkins (1993) describes the performance as “rehearsal” and “rehearsing”, “Djanet is constantly rehearsing her part, as she learns more about who she really is, adopting another name, doing all the things that an actor rehearsing a role would do” (p. 36), more so because the primacy of the performance text continues to be deferred, in fact, pushed off the stage altogether as an epistemological irrelevance. While this approach, argues Bennett (1995), allows Sears to “provide a cultural context for the narrative that will subsequently unfold,” in a context of “audience-stage relationships initiated by the conventions of genre and stylistic choices” (p. 16), Grace (2004) considers Sears’s performance style as a self-conscious essentialism of identity formation. According to Grace, the performance “enacts the performative in that the performer changes, adjusts, modifies identity and life-story in the process of playing the part and we are able to watch and possibly learn that identities need not be prescribed, interpellated, and fixed” (p. 10). Sears definitely makes it count toward the foregrounding of her African heritage.

Whereas Moser describes the performance as “performative auto/biographics,” in the way it foregrounds some sort of intimacy with the audience, such an interaction between the performer and her/his audience describes the kind of eminence and performative artistry that one witnesses of the Yoruba oral artist, who always combines with her/his voice which follows a recognizable rhythmic melody (together with other signals notably pitch range, articulation control, and tempo that function as affective and emotive indices) with other paralinguistic features such as movement of the body parts (Olatunji 1993, p. 9), that shows the privileging of entertainment above the main goal of the performance.

The last part of the performance is symbolic of a search for, and the eventual discovery of, her roots as underlined by a “transformation and a metamorphosis from the point of unknown to the known” which she expresses powerfully through body language and mode of dressing: jeans and t-shirt, with an African dress on top. Although Tompkins’ observation is acute that the mode of dressing suggests that Sears “arrives at a hybrid form of Guyanese and Jamaican from her parents, British from her birth, Canadian from her current home country, and the many African heritages she has ‘adopted’” (p. 36), what would be more insightful is a culturally-detailed and specific analysis which accounts for the “Africaness” and possibly “Yorubanness” of the image, of the “African Boubou and a headdress,” that Sears leaves with her audience at the end of the performance.

The gesture of decorating her head and the special way in which she draws attention to the head with the African head wrap is profoundly Yoruba, in terms of the recognition and respect that the people accord the head. “Ori” (the head), among the Yoruba, is one’s personal destiny, or divine consciousness, which constitutes in this case, Sears’s expression of her “cultural intelligence” (Irobi 2009, p. 17), an area on which Ifá scholars, Awo Falokun Fatunmbi and Baba Ifa Karade have written extensively. According to Fatunmbi, the total self (*Tikaraeni*), in Yoruba ritual sensibility, is composed of five elements: *Ara*, the physical self (flesh, bone, heart, intestines); *Egbe*, the emotional self (heart); *Ori*, the physical head or conscious self (forehead, crown, back of skull); *Ori-inu*, the inner (character, personal destiny), and *Ori-iponri*, the higher self (Fatunmbi 1994, pp. 69–82), to all of which Sears’s gestures draw attention.<sup>5</sup> Ifa Karade (1994) links the *ori* to the divinity: Orisha, which combines *ori* (head or human consciousness) and *sha* (divine consciousness) and, in fact, “human divinity

<sup>5</sup> Arnoldi and Kreamer (1995) write that “Among the Yoruba in Nigeria...the head is the seat of *ori*, personal destiny. Surrounding this “inner head,” the physical head, visible to the world, becomes the focus of many important rituals...” (pp. 23–24).

potential” (p. 23). Sears demonstrates something in consonance with the esoteric in the performance with music and sound vibration through her Chorus which plays blues, jazz, and contemporary hip-hop, and through her mode of dressing.

Moreover, Herskovits (1941) has shown in *The Myth of the Negro Past*, how West African women in the New World survived the horror of the Middle Passage through several African patterns that were the products of their externalized religious belief including the carrying of bundles on the head, straddling of their babies to their hips, wrapping of their heads in a kerchief or headcloth, and many others, all of which are African patterns (qtd in Courlander 1963, p. 4). Sears recognizes and embraces her African roots as a powerful expression of the Sankofan spirit which she stresses in her interview with Buntin, “claiming home and [ . . . ] navigating this territory between where you’ve come from, and where you are” (Buntin 2004), is as rewarding as it can ultimately be fulfilling.

### Not the Final Word

Whereas previous analyses of Sears’s work have centered on feminist/gender concerns, which have missed some of the salient points, most especially those of race and the recuperation of her African tradition as the fount of her dramaturgy, I have argued so far in this essay ways in which her one-woman show, *Afrika Solo*, can be read as her attempt to return to her African roots, in the Sankofan spirit of “going back to get it.” Scholars working in the field of African philosophy, performance, and aesthetics have long established the philosophical underpinnings of Black aesthetics into which Sears’s play can be categorized. They have demonstrated ways by which a more robust conceptualization of the arts and performances of people of African descent globally can be achieved by paying close attention to how these artists continue to “look back,” and draw inspiration for their works from their ancestral past. Yoruba aesthetics, into which I have classified *Afrika Solo* in this essay, blend easily poetry, narratives, and theatre which are categories that overlap fluidly and are embodied by the Ifá corpus—a tradition of ritual, Yoruba epistemology, and aesthetics. Central to this tradition is the functional role that it plays in the people’s lives and in their society, different from Western conception of “art for art’s sake.” Indeed, any meaningful analysis of Sears’s dramaturgy must center the African consciousness that holds the geographies of her life together, and has determined the significant aspect of her outlook, experiences of racism, history of trauma, and the cultural resilience from Africa that maintains itself and is a source of inspiration for her.

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