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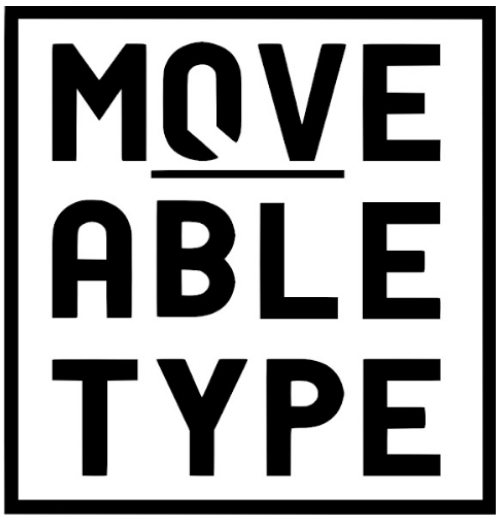

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Jazzy Ontology: Representations of Fractured and Racialised Identity in *Othello* and *All Night Long*

Thomas Langham

Through an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello* (1603), Basil Dearden's *All Night Long* (1962) reconfigures the play's constructions of self to approach a conversation about racial identity in diasporic communities and how appropriation modifies and threatens selfhood.[1] In *Othello*, Shakespeare conceives the self as something created and modified by the Other through interpersonal exchange. He stretches and explores to its limits such a construction of self, showing how it tends towards tragedy and how, through a manipulation of the eye and what it perceives, the singular self can fracture into multiple. For Dearden, jazz presents itself as a suitable body of work to probe and engage with this theme in several ways. Jazz is a cultural product of black diaspora which functions, in part, to nurture black identity and community in the face of racial delegitimisation by dominant white populations. That is to say that jazz performance exists both as a mode of creation and interpersonal exchange. Furthermore, its storied appropriation by white popular culture presents a second degree of engagement with identity, and one that mirrors closely the threat of fracture that Shakespeare explores. Dearden approaches jazz as an arena in which to engage with Shakespeare's *Othello* whose theme of identity he transposes into an exploration of racial identity and appropriation in America in the mid-twentieth century. He engages with Shakespeare's conception of the self in *Othello* as an interpersonal product subject to fracture, while altering the play's ending in order to paint a vision of the self which might be able better to resist those outside forces that threaten its existence. Therefore, Dearden adapts Shakespeare to show the integrity of jazz as a black cultural product in the face of its white appropriation.

In *Interpersonal Idiom* (2008), Nancy Selleck discusses notions of the self in early modern culture. She argues that, in the absence of 'a vocabulary for abstract, subjective, autonomous selfhood—terms such as individual, self, character, and identity', the self is contextualised and finds its source in the other.[2] Her epigraph quotes Shakespeare's Cressida: 'I have a kind of self resides with you'.[3] Cressida is not just acknowledging that the other can perceive her differently to the way she understands herself, but she takes ownership ('I have') of a self that is informed by and exists within the other. Selleck positions herself in relation to Stephen Greenblatt, who argues for a model of self-fashioning that is always 'achieved in relation to something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile'.[4] Thus, Greenblatt constructs a notion of the early modern self that demands a foil,

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[1] *All Night Long*, dir. by Basil Dearden (Rank Organisation, 1962).

[2] Nancy Selleck, *Interpersonal Idiom in Shakespeare, Donne, and Early Modern Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 3, 2.

[3] Ibid., p. 1.

[4] Ibid., p. 2.

'the alienated other', to understand itself.[5] But Selleck thinks this model limiting and aims to move beyond such a dichotomy to reach an understanding of the other and the self as interchangeable. She argues that the other can 'penetrate and alter the self' and that the other's 'perspective can shape and constitute the self'.[6] And so, whereas contemporary notions of self might understand identity to be a self-reflective process dependent on understanding one's interiority, in the early modern era, the self is understood as existing in exchange. Shakespeare explores such a construction of self through *Othello*, breaking down and showing the process itself.

Shakespeare foregrounds discussion about self in Othello, allowing Iago to lead the conversation. We see Shakespeare take the theme on in the first scene of the play, when Iago delivers a monologue on masters and followers. In approaching this subject through such terms, Iago engages with a model of interpersonal selfhood whereby each self is identified by a relationship to an other.[7] Iago suggests that his self, the 'follower' who is perceived as such by the 'master', presents a 'visage of duty' (1.1.7) and thus he does not define his selfhood in isolation but acknowledges the power of the other's perception of him and his own power in influencing that perception. In this way, he emphasises the agency he has over his self. Therefore, when he cryptically tells Roderigo, 'Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago' (1.1.56), he understands the gravity of his social context in informing his self. Another version of the line could read, 'If I were the master, I would not be the follower'. The use of proper names in the original line makes it clear that these particular categories of self—master and follower—are in this moment inseparable from the subjects they define. And further, by abstractly blurring the lines of self, Iago presents the interdependence of two selves yoked in such a fashion. That is to say that both Iago and Othello are formed through exchange with each other.

Greenblatt's model of the early modern self could be applied to Iago's line, if we read into the abstraction of identity Shakespeare allows Roderigo and Iago to take part in by calling Othello 'The Moor'. Kim F. Hall has commented on this habitual abstraction, suggesting that, 'rather than trying to pin down Othello to a specific geographic location, Shakespeare took advantage of the rich and at time disturbing network of allusions associated with "Moor"'.[8] However, even if Othello is considered an abstract other, or Other, against which to define white European Christianity, Iago locates the site of exchange at which the self is formed. That is to say that interpolation does not happen in just one direction, but that Iago informs Othello's self just as the opposite can be said to be true. If Othello is othered by Iago, then Iago is othered in turn. This stance holds more weight if we remember that Othello is abstract neither to the characters within their reality nor to the audience watching, who have nevertheless been given the identity of the moor through the name of the play. Therefore, Shakespeare constructs a notion of self that reads more similarly to the interpersonal model suggested by Selleck. In his study, *The Improbability of Othello* (2010), Joel B. Altman offers a reading of Iago's line, 'I am not what I am' (1.1.64) which would seem to concur with Selleck's model. Arguing that the phrase 'what I am' 'refers to that aspect of self that is historical, stabilised, identifiable, and hence

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[5] Selleck, p. 2.

[6] Ibid.

[7] William Shakespeare, *Othello* ed. by E.A.J Honigmann and Ayanna Thompson, 2nd edn. (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2016), 1.1.43-44. Subsequent references are to this edition and are provided in the text.

[8] Kim F. Hall, 'Othello and the Problem of Blackness' in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works, Volume 1*, ed. by Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 357–374 (p. 360).

probable', while 'I am not' 'refers to that aspect of self in flux, *in potentia*, improbable insofar as it is not yet any of those things', Altman dismisses the notion that this line can simply be taken to mean 'I am not what I seem', for that seeming is crucial in defining 'what I am'.[9] When Shakespeare has Iago make this statement, he posits the mutability of the self. At the same time, with a foreboding self-awareness, he suggests that with such power to understand how he is perceived, he has great agency in mutating the selves of others.

Through Iago, then, Shakespeare exposes a self that is highly vulnerable to fracture through manipulation. We see this potentially unsettling multiplicity of the self when Othello stands over the sleeping Desdemona as he prepares for murder. In his line, 'If I quench thee, thou flaming minister' (5.2.8), Othello seems to refer to Desdemona, who he thinks has betrayed him. In this vein, 'quench' would seem to mean 'extinguish', effectively rendering the line a repeat of Othello's previous statement, 'put out the light!' (5.2.7). This would also make sense in the context of the other references to fire in this scene, such as 'flaming minister', 'Promethean heat' (5.2.12) and 'light relume' (5.2.13). Othello makes the argument that to kill the Desdemona he sees in front of him, he acts to preserve the 'monumental alabaster' (5.2.5) of the Desdemona he once perceived. To put out her light gives him agency to relume that light and reclaim the self that he married. Yet we might also read the 'thee' in Othello's line as a reference to himself in the third person. In this case, the word 'quench' would take its meaning, to satiate, and thus Othello would be implying that to engage with his desire for revenge is to restore his own light, his pride. Shakespeare repeatedly falls on this metaphor of consumption for revenge. A few pages later Othello says of Cassio, 'Had all his hairs been lives / My great revenge had stomach for them all' (5.2.73). This reading could also prompt a reinterpretation of the preceding line, 'Put out the light, and then put out the light!' (5.2.7), where one light refers to his revenge and the other to Desdemona.

This fracturing of Othello through the multiple valencies of the pronoun 'thee' is given greater weight when Desdemona awakens moments before her death and insists, 'A guiltless death I die' (5.2.121) and identifies her killer as 'Nobody' (5.2.124). Earlier, near the beginning of the play, Desdemona had claimed that she 'saw Othello's visage in his mind' (1.3.287) but here, in the anticipation of her murder, being deprived of her self–the very light by which Othello was able to recognise *his* self–she is not able to recognise her husband as such. Desdemona repeatedly utters 'O' in this scene, as if having reached the very limit of language, of articulating her self, but the exclamation also gives dimension to Desdemona's final, 'O, farewell!' (5.2.123). Here, it is as if Desdemona is trying to say Othello and yet can muster only a single syllable, the rest being obscured.

These terms clearly recall one of the central dichotomies of *Othello* which Dearden approaches in *All Night Long* to explore the construction of race identity in America. In the film, jazz is portrayed as a black cultural space under the threat of white siege. Yet its use also serves to activate and compliment explorations of the Other and the interpersonal both through the cultural history and significance of the form, as well as the practices and experience of the music in the present moment. Langston Hughes described jazz as the 'inherent expressions of Negro life in America: the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world… pain swallowed in a

[9] Joel B. Altman, *The Improbability of Othello Rhetorical Anthropology and Shakespearean Selfhood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 17.

smile'.[10] When Hughes references the 'Negro soul' here, he does not allude to an innate African-ness and thereby engage in an act of Othering that perceives race as more than socially constructed. The 'Negro soul' refers, rather, to an experience of shared struggle and adverse positionality that is activated through performance and bolsters racial validity, identity and community. However, while jazz has an extensive history within communities of the African diaspora, from where it originates, it has also become subject to delegitimisation by systematic appropriation by majority white culture as well as whitewashing.

This is first made clear through the adaptation of *Othello's* Cyprus, a cultural melting-pot in the early modern world, into a London back-alley warehouse. Paul Skrebels comments in his essay on *All Night Long* that, through its immediate transformation of setting, the first act of the play is missing from the film.[11] This is for the most part true, the significant action beginning in the locale that remains the setting throughout the adaptation. However, we are given a transition between settings during the opening credits that can be said to thematically replicate the movement from Venice to Cyprus in the play. Shakespeare often used geographic movement to interrogate and destabilise his characters and, 'in Othello, the geographic split seems to signify the movement from Christian civilisation to an unstable outpost'.[12] At the beginning of the play, we see Cyprus as a place pulled between the influence of Venice and the Ottomans. What is currently Christian has the potential to become non-Christian. Despite this threat being mitigated before the primary action of the play, Shakespeare still positions his characters in a locale in which there is greater opportunity for the Christian self to fracture. In *All Night Long*, the opening shots of the film show us Roderigo's equivalent, Rod, leaving his butlered townhouse. He drives from the wide-open spaces of wealthy central London, across the river, and to his warehouse in the narrow streets of a less wealthy locale. Therefore, Dearden activates a similar site of tension by positioning the film's locale as morally unstable in comparison to the homes of the wealthy, decidedly white London elite. He emphasises this fact with the clap of thunder as Rod arrives, signalling to the audience through this trope that this site is ominous. By extension, when Rod arrives at his club, the African American jazz double-bassist Charles Mingus is already there.

It is significant that it is Rod, rather than the black musician who already occupies the space, who should be the one who owns the club. In the *Black Atlantic* (1993), Paul Gilroy argues that 'while the black vernacular tradition undoubtedly drew upon performances, texts and styles from Africa, as a result of enslavement those performances, texts and styles were reshaped into new forms'.[13] Furthermore, 'by the time jazz had been transposed to the northern states of the US […] it had become virtually synonymous with miscegenation'.[14] Through such perceptions of jazz, along with its association with black rights, it became thought of by dominant white culture as morally questionable. In undermining its validity as an artform, while also taking ownership of it, the dominant

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[10] Langston Hughes, 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain', in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. by Angelyn Mitchell (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 55–59 (p. 59).

[11] Paul Skrebels, '"All Night Long": Jazzing Around with "Othello"', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 36.2 (2008), 147–156 (p. 150).

[12] Ayanna Thompson, 'Introduction' in *Othello*, ed. by E.A.J Honigmann and Ayanna Thompson, 2nd edn. (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2016), pp. 1–114 (p. 22).

[13] Paul Gilroy, quoted in Paul Williams, *Paul Gilroy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p. 88.

[14] Skrebels, p.152.

culture protects itself from supposed dilution. Therefore, Dearden presents a setting of moral ambiguity and at the fringes of acceptability; a locale that is white-owned but which signals toward a cultural product perceived as socially dangerous by white normative culture. Later, a white man responds to his wife disapproving of the warehouse: 'Haven't you heard honey. Jazz is noisy, you can't have an all-night session in Mayfair'. If Dearden had previously reminded us that jazz is of black origin, then this line can be taken to infer that black culture is disruptive to white culture (not necessarily from the perspective of the guest but by the social stigmas that inform him). Another guest comments, 'Wow. This is spook city'. His inflection implies he means 'spook' as in scary rather than 'spook' as in the racial slur, but the double meaning nevertheless contributes to the coding of this space as black. As such, it exists in a similar discursive space to Shakespeare's Cyprus. However, this black social space that is perceived as threatening, already under white ownership, is also under the threat of whitewashing. Aside from Rex (Othello), the party is almost entirely made up of white musicians. If in Shakespeare's text Iago functions to destabilise identity, then Dearden broadens his scope for the presentation of such a dynamic. He shows a setting of appropriation that has already been subject to a kind of identity theft and fracture. Therefore, when Johnny Cousin (Iago) is motivated toward challenging Rex's status as bandleader, he is emblematic of social forces and trends that are already in process.

Dearden adapts Iago into a figure emblematic of how dominant culture appropriates black identity. Similarly to Shakespeare's Iago, Dearden's Johnny Cousin is acutely aware of and concerned with the self. Johnny brings his own drum set to the party, despite Rod's telling him he could use his. The drum set is branded with his name, indicating early on a predilection to the presentation of his image. Skrebels compares Johnny Cousin to Paul Whiteman, 'the self-proclaimed king of jazz … a white man who sought to 'clean up' jazz by divorcing it from its black roots'.[15] This comparison is representative of wider trends in the history of jazz, '[a] white appropriation [that] extends the civilising project involving colonisation and economic exploitation'.[16] Johnny Cousin is drawn towards usurping Rex (literally 'king') and his position of acclaim within the jazz community of this film. Johnny's attempt to assert himself as a jazz authority goes as far as to his explicit identification with a minority group of 'white American jazz musicians'. Through trying to present himself as living with adverse positionality, it could be said that he attempts to position himself as identifying with the origins of the culture. Considering the status of jazz as a site of interpersonal exchange of shared adverse positionalities, in depicting himself as such he tries to justify his belonging within that culture. This becomes evidently untrue when one considers that Rex (with the brief exception of Charles Mingus) is the only black musician with a speaking role in the film. Even though Johnny's comment on white American jazz musicians is presented as a joke, other more earnest lines in the film such as, 'Walk out on me like all the others did', give context as to the reality of his perception as existing in a minority position. Dearden highlights this absurdity through the sheer predominance of white people in the film.

Furthermore, Johnny's privilege and attempts at appropriation are what enable his malicious agency in the film. Skrebels describes how Johnny 'uses Rod's expensive new recording equipment to secretly tape and re-edit separate conversations among himself, Cass, Delia and Benny into a single tape that he plays back to Rex as 'proof' of Delia's

[15] Skrebels, p.151.

[16] Ibid.

deceit'.[17] Therefore, the tools of manipulation are accessible only to those who can afford them. In comparison with Iago, it is apparent that Johnny's malicious intent and the enacting of his plan is considerably more improvisational. Whereas Iago preempts his plot by telling the audience how he plans to act, Johnny realises an opportunity for manipulation in the moment and takes it. For example, at 00:54:34, a panning zoom on Johnny's face shows the spark of inspiration immediately before he starts to record Cas's conversation with Benny (Bianca) so that he can later edit the tape. This relatively minor change in character, Johnny's inclination toward improvisation, mirrors the subject of the film's setting. Rob Wallace describes the source of the contemporary culture of improvisation as 'African American culture and the musical forms which would eventually be called jazz'.[18] Johnny's edited tape mirrors, and perhaps mocks the experiential exchange of selves inherent in the culture of jazz. His desire to install himself in the place of the black bandleader takes form through a weaponised mode of improvisation. Whereas the collective experience of group performance nurtures interpersonal identities, Johnny's manipulation of Rex through improvisational means produces a similar effect but with negative and fractious results. Johnny is presented as a force of interpolating fracture that is enabled by the privilege of his whiteness and through a practice of appropriation.

Having identified these disruptive forces in *All Night Long,* Dearden ends his film in a manner which provides resistance against such forces, revising both the play's ending and reimagining Shakespeare's presentation of self. As previously shown, in Shakespeare's text, the self is presented as mutable and vulnerable to fracture. Cynthia Marshall speaks to the 'so-called birth of subjectivity' by suggesting that narratives of self-shattering offered a return to 'the unstable and poorly defined idea of selfhood familiar from humoral psychology'.[19] Selfhood in Shakespeare's *Othello* is vulnerable to what Marshall describes as emotional contagion, an idea that resists 'the emergence of the modern autonomous self'.[20] Dearden's *All Night Long* engages with such a depiction of self, only to reject it in favour of something more fixed and resistant to collapse. Dearden alludes to this potential to fracture when he transposes Othello's seizure as Rex's headache following Johnny Cousin's drum performance. We are not told about the headache until later, but during the performance Rex is shown touching his temples in a semi-transparent shot laid over another shot of Johnny playing the drums. For Dearden, music is given the potential and power to inform and interpolate self. Johnny's drum literally occupies a space within Rex and lingers through the form of a headache. This moment, in presenting the potential for fracture and the split of Rex's self, is given more power through *All Night Long*'s nature as an adaptation. Dearden uses the expectation of fracture created by Shakespeare but speaks back to him when he refuses to fully engage with his plot to the end.

The largest change made to Shakespeare's plot is that Delia (Desdemona) is not killed, and thus Rex never commits suicide. Dearden does not entirely ignore the tragedy's murder-suicide; he goes as far as to show Rex strangling Delia and asking, 'What have you done to me?' As a result, at this moment, Dearden engages with such ideas of self that Shakespeare investigates, implicating a fracture of Rex's self as he perceives a fracture

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[17] Skrebels, p. 149.

[18] Rob Wallace, *Improvisation and the Making of American Literary Modernism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 2.

[19] Cynthia Marshall, *The Shattering of Self: Violence, Subjectivity, and Early Modern Texts* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2002), p.4.

[20] Marshall, p. 5.

between the Delia he married and the one falsely presented to him by Johnny. It is not long before this scene that Rod introduces Delia's performance by telling Rex of 'an aspect of her personality which you never suspected… I give you the new, the true, Delia Lane.' When Rex leaves Delia motionless on the bed, the audience is led to believe that the film is faithful to the play's plot, the machinations of Johnny Cousin's Iago fulfilled. Imagining for a moment that the film does end here, Dearden would seem to give validity to the racist associations of jazz with 'illicit sex'.[21] Skrebels recalls how jazz nightclubs 'were regarded as places where black men preyed on white women, and the facility with which the races mixed through the medium of jazz was seen to be "lowering the tone of the whole national identity"'.[22] Such a perception is signalled towards when Cass suggests jazz is 'pure libido symbolism'. And so, when Dearden has a black man strangle a white woman in a jazz club, he very much includes himself in a conversation that sought to undermine both jazz and interracial relationships. Therefore, when Delia emerges alive, the drama of getting so close to a replication of the play's events brings greater attention to the film's refusal of a 'faithful' adaptation. In the final scene between Rex and Delia, Rex touches her bruised neck and looks to his hand in horror before intimately touching her face. Rex engages with his potential toward violence and disregards that version of self formed through the manipulation of Johnny Cousin. When, in the final shot of the film, Rex puts his arm around Delia as they walk off, the audience is led to believe that they have survived something that threatened fracture, but they remained as one. The self is therefore conceived in *All Night Long* as having greater power against disruption. Skrebels takes this further, asserting that 'Rex's throwing off of Johnny's control is given extra symbolic force, as representing something more than the triumph of a heroically individual will'.[23] That is to say that Rex's resistance against fracture is emblematic of the continuation of black identity through jazz despite the attempts to whitewash and undermine its validity in popular music culture.

The final moments of each production does well to summarise the distinctions I have already identified. In Othello, Lodovico tells us that he will return to Venice to report the events of the play. Othello has just killed himself and Lodovico says to Cassio, 'Myself will straight aboard, and to the state/ This heavy act with heavy heart relate' (5.2.368). Just as the fractured self of Desdemona is killed, only for the 'true' Desdemona to be briefly reanimated, Othello attempts to reclaim some part of his pre-fractured self through suicide. However, Shakespeare asserts that it is not Othello that gets the final say in his presentation of self. Instead, this power is given to Lodovico through his telling of the story back in Venice. Othello's self is extended beyond the time frame of the play, its mutability projected into the future. The awkward construction of this final line emphasises this, the 'heavy act' modified by Lodovico's 'heavy heart'. The final word 'relate' captures the essence of Shakespeare's theme, not in the story but in the act of telling the story, the power of point of view in constructing self. On the other hand, *All Night Long* finishes with a conversation between Johnny and Emily. He tells her, 'I love nobody, don't even love Johnny. Get out Emily. Go find somebody else to love'. We then watch as he plays the drums to an empty warehouse. Thus, in his attempts to push beyond his station, Johnny becomes isolated from his community, his wife and himself. In taking advantage of the interpersonal nature of jazz, Johnny achieves the opposite of his goal, failing to fully interpolate Rex's self and becoming presumably cut off completely from the community in which he was trying

[21] Skrebels, p. 152.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

to claim a position of prestige. Therefore, while both constructions of self are interpersonal, Dearden presents it as a stable category of which the individual has control and which can provide resistance against corruption.

Thus, Dearden adapts Shakespeare as to create an expectation of fracturing identity only to destabilise such a model in favour of one that perceives the self as having greater strength against mutability. Shakespeare frames his notion of the early modern self as something informed by and conceived in the eye of the other, more in line with Selleck's model of early modern selfhood than Greenblatt's. We see that when the self can take the place of the Other, and vice-versa, the creation, maintenance and mutation of self is an ongoing interpersonal process. Like Shakespeare, Dearden conforms to a notion of self that is interpersonal and in part formed through exchange. This is evident from his use of jazz and his presentation of music as a modifying force. The film's difference presents itself when Dearden teases Shakespeare's ending only to choose an alternative, constructing a model of self that resists unwarranted mutation. In this way, in *All Night Long,* Dearden makes a valuable contribution to and intervention in the discussion of minority racial identity in the US and the destabilising threat of its appropriation. Dearden presents this threat as real and the self as truly susceptible to fracture, but through his rewriting of Shakespeare, he also presents a self with the agency against the eye of the other.

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