Border Crossings: Women, Race, and Othello in Gayl Jones’s Mosquito

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As early as 1982, novelist Gayl Jones indicated her ambition “to deal with the whole American continent in [her] fiction—the whole Americas—and to write imaginatively of blacks anywhere/everywhere.”¹ Her first novel, Corregidora, traces its heroine’s family story back to Brazilian slavery, contextualizing the experiences of black subjects in the United States within the diaspora throughout the hemisphere. Her most recent novel, Mosquito,² offers a more grandly scaled meditation on the African diaspora as a transatlantic as well as a pan-American phenomenon. Set along the Rio Grande in south Texas—and thus poised along the imaginary line drawn between global north and global south, Anglo and Hispanic, Protestant and Catholic—the novel passionately affirms an understanding of American national and racial identities as the products of crossings between old world and new, and across arbitrarily drawn hemispheric borders.

Structured in an assertively nonlinear manner, Mosquito unfolds entirely through the perceptions and observations of its title character, Sojourner Nadine Jane Nzingha Johnson, who got the nickname “Mosquito” after a childhood reaction to an insect bite. The main plot of the novel stems from her discovery of a pregnant Mexican woman hiding in a truckload of industrial detergents that Mosquito is bringing across the border on her way back to her home base in Texas City. Despite the language barrier, Mosquito understands the woman to be in some danger and decides to take her to Father Ray, whom her friend Delgadina—a scholarly bartender who wants to become a detective—has led her to believe is the head of a shadowy movement dedicated to smuggling political prisoners across the Mexican border into the United States. Mosquito soon becomes involved in the Sanctuary movement. But outside this central narrative through-line, the much greater bulk of the novel consists of jazzy riffs: asides, meditations, speculations, and verbal trickery that mix facts with made-up details that have the appearance of facts. Readers can’t always tell the difference, and neither can Mosquito herself, although she is scrupulous in flagging the places where she is not sure of, or decides to withhold some of, the whole truth.

The novel’s very digressiveness, its lack of fidelity to narrative clarity,
is what most offended Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in his exasperated *New York Times* review; he found it “sprawling, formless, maddening.” Carrie Tirado Bramen connects Gates’s characterization to his investment in what she calls “the Black Aesthetic’s most salient feature: the political investment in realism.” In a striking image, he found the novel to be “drunk with words and out of control,” figuratively staggering out of some critical barroom in broad daylight, incapable of taking its place alongside those normal “linear narratives with a beginning, a middle and an end.” But a central assumption of the present discussion is that in a novel deeply committed to creative and joyful acts of transgressing borders—borders between nations, between races and ethnicities, and even between registers of speech—*Mosquito’s* resistance to linear narrative is functional. Jones’s refusal of beginnings, middles, and ends is the formal manifestation of her vision of race at the end of the American Century. Thus, when Sojourner Johnson decides to join the secret “new Underground Railroad” (p. 235), she speaks the novel’s will to undo deterministic relationships among nations, genders, and races, and to affirm its women’s capacity to generate new social forms and new racial identities out of the materials of the old.

*Mosquito’s* location along a hemispheric and cultural divide suggests its concern with borders and the possibility of their opening. Such an emphasis on liminality invites us to think comparatively by attending to the multiple intracultural histories of the U.S. and approaching American situations in their global or transnational contexts. But the novel’s placement along the border also invites us to pay attention to the condition of liminality itself as a kind of incubator for distinctively new cultural productions. “The U.S.-Mexican border es una herida abierta” where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds,” Gloria Anzaldúa writes. “And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture.” Anzaldúa’s striking imagery of bloody wounds that can never fully heal reminds us of the colonial violence of political dispossession and the state apparatuses refined to administer it. But it also evokes the dynamic emergence of a new third culture generated out of continual acts of recovery and reassemblage.

Border theory’s conception of this continually evolving third culture emerging from the conjunction of Anglo and Hispanic cultures adds another hemispheric dimension to the pan-Americanism that has marked Jones’s fiction from the beginning of her career. She infuses her interest in the histories of “blacks anywhere/everywhere” into *Mosquito’s* concern with borders, so that the novel’s fascination with border culture is understood as a matter of race as well as of ethnicity and language. She enlarges the frame for her black subjects beyond the distinctively American history of slavery that haunts such early works as *Corregidora* and the long poem
Song of Aninho—and again, in these works Jones was already conceiving of “America” as a place that extends beyond the borders of the United States—and imagines her characters’ blackness as shaped within a diaspora that has European terminals as well as African and American. This double axis of racial production, east and west as well as north and south, multiplies the diaspora within which we can locate Mosquito’s journey. Especially in its use of Shakespeare’s Othello, Mosquito imagines blackness as a worldwide phenomenon, one existing outside its African origins and beyond its sojourn in American slavery, drawing on its past in order to make a new kind of transnational future.

The work Mosquito does to destabilize and remake our understanding of racial identity within a self-consciously and multiply international matrix replicates the kind of cultural work discussed by historian Robin D. G. Kelley, whose work focuses on how African Americans (from all of the Americas, not just the United States) have reached across the diaspora to solicit a global black subject actively working toward political and cultural liberation. “Too frequently,” Kelley remarks, “we think of identities as cultural matters, when in fact some of the most dynamic (transnational) identities are created in the realm of politics, in the way people of African descent sought alliances and political identifications across national borders.” Mosquito Johnson’s smuggling of illegal immigrants across the border into the U.S. is surely one example of this kind of active reaching across, but the novel’s meditation on Othello offers another, as the heroine from U.S. border country comes face to face with the cultural artifacts of yet another incubator of racial feeling. Thinking longitudinally as well as latitudinally, with Othello as its hinge, my discussion of Mosquito will place a critical sense of the work black women perform toward international political liberation in relation to an account of their movements through specifically American spaces. Jones’s new world is the product of the potent dialogue she imagines between feminism and postcolonialism, between African American and Renaissance studies, between black nationalism and feminism—through, in short, a process of mixture in which the component parts both retain their individual tang and enter into transformative communion. If Mosquito imagines a borderless America, its use of Othello models the dissolving of international and disciplinary borders as the means of arriving there.

Its will to think beyond U.S. cultural hegemony suggests Mosquito’s status as a postcolonial novel. Making a black female speaker instrumental to the novel’s portrayal of the evolution of a new political order in the American borderlands speaks of Jones’s open yearning toward the possibility of new categories of discourse and being “independent of white people” (p. 535), in which women’s political agency will be particularly acknowledged. It imagines a new world liberated from a linear model of
containment and response, actively created and not merely inherited from an unexamined historical past. This notion of free flow across putatively rigid lines of racial, sexual, linguistic, and political demarcation is where Mosquito’s playful engagement with the early modern origins of racial orders begins.

At the end of the twentieth century, Jones’s novel proposes erasing borders. But in the early modern period that produced the Shakespeare play it will imaginatively deconstruct, the mapping of form borders was a new project, firmly committed to politically, ethnographically, and racially marking space. John Gillies draws our attention to how profoundly the Renaissance read maps and geographical spaces as intercessors in “a primal drama of identity, difference, and transgression.” But even Gillies’s illuminating discussion of Renaissance assumptions about the domestic and the foreign fails to explore the full implications of this “drama.” It is crucial to remember the explosion of voyaging and colonization that accompanied and was enabled by the emergence of this distinctive sense of what Giambattista Vico called a “poetic geography,” under whose terms “in describing unknown or distant things, in respect of which they . . . have not had the true idea themselves . . . men make use of the semblances of things known or near at hand.” Othello commits suicide out of the acquired convictions that are themselves produced by a way of imagining the world and its people that takes western Europe as its starting point and can only understand new phenomena as “the semblances of things known,” rather than as things new in themselves. Gillies finds the term “otherness” preferable to a “terminology of ‘race,’” which he believes is “anachronistic” to the early modern world (p. 25), but even “otherness” connotes precisely the establishment of the geographical and territorial and linguistic hierarchies through which race becomes visible. The racialization of spaces mapped and visited under the new geography was itself a product of Renaissance voyaging, the practice for which the new maps visualized the theory.

Mosquito’s metaphysical play reverses this Europeanized circuit of travel and encounter, tracing a path from new world/woman back to old world/male colonial speaker. But the novel’s use of Othello goes beyond mere reversal to address the unexamined consequences of drawing principles of European/American and white supremacy on the map. Jones’s Renaissance-postmodern mashup forcibly estranges her readers from the play’s European-male perspective as she first relocates the play to the U.S. borderlands, and then at greater length imagines blacks (especially black women) as spectators and consumers of Othello. The result is a meditation that reconfigures the play’s geographical mystique, unfixes its conclusions about racial identity and difference, and reformulates its connection between race and nation as a question about the diasporic identities of
black Americans.

In the Renaissance, Cyprus—Othello’s main setting—marked the farthest edge of western possession in the Mediterranean. It lay directly across trade routes to Egypt and the Ottoman Empire and thus attracted pirates, smugglers, and outlaws of every description. One recent editor suggests that Cyprus “could be called the Wild West of the Mediterranean.” Venice controlled it in the sixteenth century, but only through violently suppressing the native Cypriots. The constant threat of the Ottoman Empire loomed over Venice’s embattled possession of the island; indeed, the Turks seized control of Cyprus in 1572, bringing Islam to the edges of Christian and European dominion. For Cyprus’s role as the Renaissance badlands and Othello’s uneasy subtext of its unpredictable violence as a backdrop for domestic tragedy, Mosquito substitutes the dusty border town where the story of the sanctuary movement unfolds. As the anti-immigrant sentiment of the 1990s grew into violence during the first decade of the twenty-first century in the American southwest, the novel’s setting serves as a backdrop for modern iterations of cross-cultural anxiety as old as the Renaissance. Rather than the concerns of dominant Venetians in the midst of attempting to secure a rebellious foreign garrison, the novel unfolds from the perspective of Mosquito, who will dedicate herself to opening borders and thus allowing outsiders to enter and natives to affiliate themselves elsewhere, if they so desire. It offers a fuller meditation on the possibility that acts of border crossing might affect Europeans who find themselves in the New World, moving beyond Othello’s portraits of Venetian men such as Cassio and Ludovico who bring their assumptions of sexual and civic privilege with them. Thus the novel unfolds from the understanding of those who have always lived along the borders between worlds, rather than from nationalist and colonialist certainty.

Of course, the strangeness of Mosquito’s new world also invokes another Shakespearean text of cultural supersession and erasure, The Tempest. Postcolonial revisitations of the late romance have been explicitly concerned with how the language of the metropolitan center has operated to drown out the voices of the colonized periphery, and with how those colonized voices might persevere within and after imperial culture. “Call me X,” Aimé Césaire’s Caliban demands in A Tempest: “That would be best. Like a man without a name. Or, to be more precise, a man whose name has been stolen.” The choice of The Tempest by revisionist authors and of Caliban as their object of focus further suggest the degree to which the African and African Caribbean postcolonial subject of Shakespearean revision has been conceived as male. To the degree that it has essentialized the colonial subject as only and always male, much Shakespearean revision based in the New World has linked masculinity to the reconstitution of a black nation in ways that run directly counter to Jones’s vision.
in *Mosquito*. In common with other Shakespearean revisions by black American women, *Mosquito* rejects any strategy of reconstructing a black nation through rehabilitating a masculinity colonized by the cultural power of the Shakespearean text. At any rate, its diasporic sensibility renders the cultural nationalism of an earlier generation of postcolonial readers of Shakespeare moot. Jones’s focus on the processes of transit and mixing works against the emphasis on point of origin that characterizes a colonial geography and dictates a binary understanding of colonization’s terms, under which one is either European self or not-European other. The novel’s American setting, where the connection between race and nation will be blurred and finally revoked altogether, figuratively evacuates *Othello* of both its nervous awareness of Cyprus’s anarchic history and its reflexive reliance on Venice’s patriarchal and white mores.

From the opening scene, *Othello* is convinced that obedience to received ideas about race, gender and sexuality, and nationality is the underpinning of Venetian social order. In Act One, Brabantio appears as a house-proud member of the Venetian bourgeoisie, sharply rebuking the hubbub raised in his otherwise peaceful street by Iago: “What tell’st thou me of robbing? This is Venice. / My house is not a grange.” But despite his disgust at Iago’s and Roderigo’s uncouth public clamor and the implied social distance he feels from them, Brabantio is all too ready to listen to what they tell him about his daughter; indeed, he acknowledges, “this accident is not unlike [his] dream” (1.1.143). The others merely give voice to his own uneasiness about the possibility of intimacy between his daughter and the Moor. His first reaction is that Desdemona’s elopement merely confirms women’s inbred susceptibility to being “out of control,” to escape from their father’s natural right to control their behavior: “Who would be a father?” (1.1.165). But if his first reaction thus expresses a patriarchal view of the situation, his second reveals that he also understands it in racial terms. Desdemona’s behavior is so inexplicable to him that he asks Roderigo if he thinks it’s possible that Othello has put some kind of spell on her: “Is there not charms / By which the property of youth and maidhood / May be abused?” (1.1.172-74). As it turns out, of course, the strawberry-embroidered handkerchief that “proves” to Othello that his wife has been unfaithful to him has indeed been imbued with magic by an Egyptian “charmer” (3.4.55). She gave it to Othello’s mother and told her that as long as she had it his father would always love her. However, Brabantio’s suspicion that Othello might have access to deceitful magic and be willing to use it is made ironic by the fact that it is actually his kinsman, Roderigo, who plots to deceive him. Moreover, Brabantio’s and Roderigo’s reflexive adherence to rules of gender and racial difference makes it all the simpler for Iago to manipulate the both of them. They help him introduce the idea that there is something odd about the marriage into
public discourse, even if the Duke—grateful for Othello's military service to the city-state—refuses to let the possibility matter too seriously. And in fact, the play concludes that Othello is different from the Venetians, not only in his physiognomy but also in his exoticized background, ruled by magic and emotion rather than by rationality.

But as Emily Bartels has argued, reading backwards for race in Othello, basing interpretation in what we have since learned about the operations of colonialism, both obscures the extent and variety of early modern ideas about race, and erases the history of colonized people's agency and resistance. Assuming that colonial domination is the end of the story makes it impossible to conceive of new futures—such as that which Mosquito's sanctuary movement has begun to fashion, one escapee at a time. Further, and crucially for my argument here, reading backwards also erases the possibility of creative and adaptive responses by subject peoples to colonizers' cultural impositions, if one begins only with the assumption that colonialism succeeded in quashing local cultures. Accepting formerly colonized peoples' status as the product of two cultures—their native world and the world imposed on them by the colonizers—C. L. R. James was impatient with the very notion that entirely escaping the effects of colonial enculturation was possible or even desirable, however determinedly colonial subjects were beginning to work toward their own liberation. “How am I to return to non-European roots?” James asked in some annoyance. “If that means Caribbean writers today should be aware that there are emphases in their writing that we owe to non-European, non-Shakespearean roots, and the past in music that is not Beethoven, that I agree. But I don't like them posed there in the way they have been posed either-or. I don't think so. I think both of them.”

Jones's novel displays this sense of the entanglement of the possibilities of native authorship with the authority of colonialist discourse as it formally introduces Othello into the narrative. Mosquito's best friend Monkey Bread has fallen in love with Danny James, a “neo-African modernist” novelist whose latest work, The New Confessions of Othello, is being turned into a movie. Jones's Danny James has encountered frustration and rebuff as he struggled to become recognized as a maker of culture. As Monkey Bread puts it, “he usedta write this real obscure poetry about Gurdjieff and shit, but ain’t nobody heard about him till he started writing them neo-African satires” (p. 508)—until, that is, he chose black people, and especially the iconic Moor of Venice, as his subject. The New Confessions of Othello approaches the racial inscriptions of Shakespeare's text by reversing what Danny James sees as the play's “traditional preconceptions” (p. 503) of the relative place of black and white. For example, Delgadina explains, “in certain parts of the novel he reverses all the imagery so that people are always talking to Othello about the prestige of his race, the African race”
James’s Desdemona is still white, but in this novel within Mosquito she “is the one who is depicted with the exotic history . . . Desdemona is depicted as the exceptional white, you know. If all whites were like you, Othello is always saying” (p. 503). Miguelita adumbrates the ecumenism and exceptionality of Danny James’s Desdemona. When her husband first saw her fallen from social grace, “selling that biker shit and them slave bracelets and she wasn’t acting like the ordinary gringa . . . I think that it’s more than Miguelita herself that he’s in love with, the fact that there’s a gringa who’s not a gringa, you know” (p. 153). Yet, merely reversing racial tropes is not the same as undoing them altogether. Apart from C. L. R. James’s doubt that we can somehow completely extract ourselves from our colonial histories to make ourselves over, Jones implies that gender as well as the class status created by formal education matters to the reconstitution of black identity. “[O]ver six feet tall” (p. 52), Mosquito knows that she will “never resemble none of them women that plays the love interest, white or African American” (p. 72). Mosquito’s race complicates her access to cultural mobility as much as it contradicts her claims to female beauty: “[W]hen I go to some of these warehouses to get my industrial detergents, you know, they be asking me to show them my green card, like they be thinking I don’t look American enough for them, and I be telling them I’m a citizen” (p. 307). A black woman, she is a weak signifier of feminine as well as civic value, virtually invisible under the terms of white and U.S. dominion. (This social invisibility, of course, will come in handy once she begins to smuggle refugees into the country.)

But unlike the less privileged Mosquito and Monkey Bread, Danny James’s sense of himself as a black American has been developed through his recourse to a more familiar kind of black internationalism: his travel to Paris. His yearning for a sense of cultural validity figures in his response to what he feels is a vanished golden age of black intellectual accomplishment. Monkey Bread accompanies him to a club where,

he sat with some of his musician friends talking about Albert Ayler and the Congo, the New Republic of the Congo. One of them musicians kinda reminds me of a rajah. They usedta all know each other in Paris. But say Paris today ain’t like the old days and talking about Wilfredo Lam and Ahmed Yacoubi and even somebody named Cleopatra who ain’t the historical Cleopatra but some woman they all knowed in Paris who usedta congregate at Port Afrique which were formally known as Bwana’s Table but that were not politically correct so they renamed it Port Afrique. I told them I didn’t know none of what they were talking about, so he gived me a copy of a book called From Harlem to Paris by a French intellectual who writes about Richard Wright and other writers and intellectuals of color and which tells about all the Negroes that usedta go to Paris. Danny James say he been to Paris, but he ain’t in that book, though, ‘cause he ain’t considered one of the canonical writers. (pp. 508-09)
Later, she accompanies Danny and his girlfriend Djamila, “an African woman from London” (p. 509), to a bar where “they was talking about Bricktop’s in Paris and the Bal Colonial and the Nardals and Prince Kojo and Claude McKay, Jessie & Nella, Dorothy and Anna and Emanuel’s wife . . . and Angela Davis in Paris reinventing herself” (p. 510). Monkey Bread is excluded from the intimacy that she wants with Danny James, intimacy he shares with Djamila and with the whole of black high culture. But he may in fact experience some of the same exclusion she feels because he is not “one of the canonical writers” and never will be, as long as he even indirectly acknowledges the centrality of the most canonical writer of them all.

The role of Paris between the world wars as a beacon for African Americans drawn to its reputation as a progressive haven and a center of black internationalism has been widely discussed. In the novel, Paris’s iconic status for black intellectuals of a certain stripe stands in for Venice, the glamorous and troubled international capital where Othello begins. But the question that remains here about Danny James’s invocation of his life in Paris is how it differs from and whether it can be reconciled with Mosquito’s simultaneously New World and European sensibility, and with her consequent synthesis of a new way for black people to traverse American spaces. For Paul Gilroy, diaspora is a dynamic and “intricate web of cultural and political connections [that] binds blacks here to blacks elsewhere.” Diasporic cultural productions “have carried inside them oppositional ideas, ideologies, theologies and philosophies” capable of forging “new definitions of ‘race’” (“There Ain’t,” p. 157). Diasporic culture challenges essentialist thinking about racial identities “precisely because it is incompatible with . . . nationalist and raciological thinking” (Against Race, p. 125). While Danny James’s fascination with the city’s historic role as a cradle of black intellectual achievement is not so surprising, the novel implies that his Francophilia carries serious implications for the ways in which he can feel himself bound to Monkey Bread. For all his frustration with a white literary culture that will not grant him a speaking voice until he learns to commodify his blackness for its consumption, he nonetheless speaks in its voice as he responds to Monkey Bread primarily as an exotic primitive: “He says I reminds him of Bastet and the Venus Hottentot combined,” she reports in a letter to Mosquito (p. 509).

The reference here to Bastet, the cat-headed ancient Egyptian goddess of music and ecstatic dance, fits in with the promotion of African culture in the world outside Africa and black American communities in the United States undertaken by such pioneers of Négritude as Lam, the Cuban-born painter whose father was Chinese and whose grandfather was a slave born in Senegal. What is rather more troubling is James’s comparison of Monkey Bread to the so-called “Venus Hottentot,” the South
African woman Saartje Baartman who was displayed naked throughout Europe between 1810 and 1815 as a living example of the physical difference of black African women from white European ones. Just as discussion of the Renaissance’s new geography seems incomplete without consideration of the material effects of the cultural work that those new ways of mapping made possible, so too does a consideration of Paris as a liberating site for black intellectuals seem incomplete without consideration of how the négrophilie of the 1920s and 1930s worked to create and reproduce blackness as the subject of a white and French racial gaze.

French fascination with Africa and with black bodies may have been given new life by a sense of the fragility and decay of the bourgeois order after World War I, but the primitivism that was the cultural expression of this fascination drew and built on pre-existing assumptions of Africa as the product of colonial knowledge. Rejecting a modernism it perceived as exhausted and hypocritical, primitivism embraced and constructed blackness as modernism’s opposite: atavistic, sauvage, expressive, and free. These fantasies of the primitive subject repeatedly appropriated blacks’ sexuality—and especially the sexuality of black women—as their visual expression. The French career of Josephine Baker, the “Jazz Cleopatra,” began by tracing a similar (if less publicly debased) narrative of Africanized sexual display. Danny James’s masculinity allows him access to this trade in black female bodies, even though his blackness has up to now barred him from eloquence in white literary culture. Shakespeare, and especially the contested figure of Othello, the Moor of Venice, grants him entrance, but differently, I would say, from the familiarity with European literary culture Mosquito expresses in her easy invocation of metaphysical lyric. Mosquito brings up John Donne only to turn him inside out, and then makes her linguistic inversion material by joining it to a radical politics of reorientation. In contrast, Danny James reverses Shakespeare’s visual trope but is content to maintain the “appropriating and fetishizing [of] the primitive” that marks Othello’s stage and critical history and that has more largely marked modernism and postmodernism in the west. This visual fetishizing of black bodies—confining them to the space of object, barring their access to active subjectivity—exists to deny the kind of interchange and mutual influence Mosquito will claim as she makes her way toward a borderless society. Danny James reproduces Monkey Bread as a cultural manifestation of something he, as a black male artist and thinker, is not. She becomes his exotic other: juke-joint nature to his café culture. Just like the Venetians who are dumbfounded to discover that Othello has an emotional life outside that demanded by his role as the military defender of their city-state, Danny James’s racial and ethnic fantasies are more powerful than the reality of the woman before his eyes.

When he was introduced to Monkey Bread “and she started talking to
him he said, Lawdy Miss Clawdy” (p. 507). The song “Lawdy Miss Clawdy,” which reached Number One for R & B singer and producer Lloyd Price in 1952, describes a strong woman who, to the chagrin of the male voice bemoaning her sexual allure, does what she pleases. He tells Monkey Bread that “he could relate to some of his other women friends intellectually, but he related to (her) emotionally. Or something like that” (p. 507). He expresses this emotional response to her through reference to a sexually conflicted shout from the heart of rhythm and blues, for all his transatlantic sophistication. Mosquito generously notes in response to Monkey Bread’s report of this first meeting that there “ain’t too many intellectuals that even know who Lawdy Miss Clawdy is”; Danny James saw Monkey Bread as part of “the masses” but didn’t reduce her to “an abstraction’ like a lotta intellectuals” (p. 507). Fair enough. But it is also clear from Monkey Bread’s letter and from Mosquito’s commentaries on her friend’s attraction to Danny James that her standing among the masses prevents him from recognizing her as another maker of culture (although her associates in the underground Daughters of Nzingha, who maintain a secret archive of hermetic African texts on the internet, recognize her as precisely that). Instead, she appears to him as a modern pop archetype of black woman-hood, the funky, destructive, and irresistible Miss Clawdy. He may be more the product of a globalized U.S. popular culture, with its production of nonwhite women both in the United States and abroad, what Coco Fusco describes as the objects of “individualized, and often eroticized, modes of cultural appropriation and consumption that substitute for equitable exchange,” than he realizes.31 Monkey Bread, Miss Clawdy, the Cleopatra who was not the real Cleopatra, and the Venus Hottentot are all racial prosthetics through whom he can experience and express the black identity that his identification with white literary culture has compromised in him.

To be entirely accurate, Mosquito does not unequivocally assert that Danny James produces Monkey Bread within primitivist discourse. Our informant is Mosquito herself, who tells us that Danny James refers to Monkey Bread “as a naive representative of the race or something like that, and told her he would put her into one of his books.” But she adds that she’s not sure “whether he called her a naive representative of the race or a native representative of the race, ’cause you know I don’t know if that were a typo of Monkey Bread’s, ’cause she uses them word processors now, you know” (p. 507). Neither am I saying that there is something bad about Danny James wanting to wrap himself in Shakespeare’s cultural authority; with C. L. R. James, I believe that the Shakespeare phenomenon is almost unavoidable for educated westerners, so it’s not so surprising that he should identify in some way. (I would add that Danny James does not seem to recognize that the canonical authority he envies in Shakespeare but essentially leaves unquestioned can be an ideological tool for neutralizing art’s
liberatory potential, a potential Mosquito seizes on in her play with Donne and Father Ray.) My point, though, is that whether or not his impulse to primitivize Monkey Bread is overt, Danny James still seems to see her only as the perfect blank slate for writing both the goddess Bastet and the whore Miss Clawdy upon, intellectually void herself but waiting to be filled up with his and his friends’ reminiscences about Paris in “the old days.”

It is Shakespeare’s disbelieving Othello, of course, who asks whether “this fair paper, this most goodly book” of his white-skinned wife’s open countenance was “Made to write ‘whore’ upon” (4.2.71, 72). That Othello sees Desdemona as a “fair paper” points us to her white skin, but the reference to her as a “goodly book”—a prewritten script—also invokes a certain quality of familiarity and readability about her. Othello knows, or has known, who she is just by looking at her. What feels most insupportable about his suspicions of her infidelity is that the suspected new truth about her deviates so devastatingly from his belief in her innocence: “O thou black weed, / Who art so lovely fair, and smell'st so sweet, / That the sense aches at thee, would thou hadst ne'er been born!” (4.2.67-69). Othello’s belief in Desdemona’s ineffable sweetness is probably a misunderstanding of his strong-willed, sensuous wife, just as Danny James misconstrues Monkey Bread. In Mosquito, Miguelita, the novel’s Desdemona, recalls that even when her friend Sophie

... She used to run from men who wanted to cuddle her until she turned eighteen, and then she started running toward some of them, but only the ones she wanted. She’s the sort of woman who can be everything. I mean the men can see whatever they want to, you know, whatever they want to see in her. But don’t tell Mr. Delgado I told you so. (p. 158)

Miguelita’s protective husband knows her only as a fragile victim, but she maintains a core of sexual agency whose existence she will never let him suspect.

Danny James’s reading (or misreading) of Monkey Bread results in no one’s death, and neither robs anyone of his or her own innocence or destroys his or her belief in another’s. But it does impose a certain kind of purity and blankness on its object, an imposed purity of origins and purpose that runs counter to Mosquito’s sense of the multivalence of African-American identity. Surprisingly, Monkey Bread herself displays some of the same objectifying practice on other black people that Danny James exerts on her, suggesting that class difference as well as gender difference operates within black communities, and is not merely a force imposed on them from the outside by whites. Inviting all members of the Daughters of Nzingha to “another one of her famous Jim Dandy to the Rescue parties,” Monkey Bread says it will be “a good, old-fashioned party and is not for Negrophobics. We’re going to have Native African watermelon,
fried chicken, pork chops, turnip greens and grits!” Like Danny James, she indulges in a primitivist vision of other black people. Her party will take place on board the yacht of the Hollywood star Monkey Bread serves as a personal assistant, and she advises prospective guests, “There will be numerous opportunities to party with the local coloreds as the yacht cruises the historical towns and villages of peoples of African descent” (p. 429). Monkey Bread is marked by her hybrid social status and the scopic privilege it purchases, both object and objectifier, as her party will turn some of the same curatorial gaze on “the local coloreds” that Danny James turns on her.

*The New Confessions of Othello’s* rehabilitation of Othello as a debonair and irresistible man of the world is about Danny James finding a way to counter the weight of Shakespeare, gatekeeper to the edifice of literature from which he felt himself to be barred. But if his reaction to *Othello* turns on a mere reversal of racial tropes (and on stealing some of Shakespeare’s mojo as cultural progenitor for himself), what is striking about Mosquito’s reaction to Delgadina’s *précis* of his novel is how different her reaction to Shakespeare’s play is from his. Mosquito knows “That Othello supposed to a be true Shakespearean hero,” and remembers that somewhere in her family there’s an “Othello Johnson” (p. 503). Not only is she not as powerfully struck by the new novel’s mere reversal of racial stereotypes unaccompanied by any fuller attempt to interrogate, much less attempt to undo, the rigidly binary thinking that undergirds them as Hollywood seems to be, but the presence of the play has been written across her own family’s bloodline in the naming of this distant relative. Living as she does under the radar of citizenship, she has a different relationship to Shakespeare than does the old-fashioned cosmopolitan Danny James, who forms himself solely in relation to European culture. Although she accepts his right to laugh at aspects of current racial culture—“I’m a neo-African myself . . . but I still appreciates a good satire of who I am” (p. 505)—she is also free to approach Shakespeare as an equal, without the anger and shame that drive his response.

Performing a more truly dissident meditation on *Othello* than *The New Confessions of Othello’s* mere displacement of masculine and racial authority from Shakespeare to Danny James, the novel’s handling of the Shakespeare play enables contemplation of how a play whose performance history demonstrates its utility as a master-text of western domination, male sexual anxiety, and racial fear might read in a new context, one dedicated to uncovering the obscured histories of colonized landscapes and their human subjects. Jones’s novel posits an energetic renewal of Danny James’s and Miguelita’s halting acts of memory and recovery, this time aimed beyond mere reconstitution of their wounded selves to challenge the grounds on which ancestral stories are made and understood, and from
which they derive their power.

Even before the novel introduces the story of Monkey Bread’s unrequited love for the author of *The New Confessions of Othello*, the Shakespearean tragedy obliquely announces its presence in the sad story of the wife of the owner of the cantina where Mosquito’s best friend Delgadina works. Delgadina’s boss is married to a white, possibly European, woman called Miguelita. Having come to the borderlands of south Texas with her husband, Miguelita (her husband’s name is Miguel Delgado; she and Delgadina thus exist as female diminutives of the man native to this place) is trapped between memories of her past and her inability to set down roots in her new landscape. Rumored to have been born a “real daughter of privilege,” possibly in Paris, she met her present husband when she was “selling them slave bracelets and biker jewelry out on the Avenue” (p. 152). Her true origins remain cloudy, but she is full of knowledge that can’t serve her in her present circumstances—she tries to teach Delgadina the French *ordonnance des vins*, the art of pairing wine with food, even “though you don’t much need to know the *ordonnance des vins* in a Mexican cantina” (p. 156).

Miguelita also tells Mosquito about Sophie, her mysterious French friend, who says Americans always think she’s Mexican, not just when she’s in America but when they meet her in France, and she has to keep telling them that she’s French. In England they always know she’s French. The English rather see the French the same way we see our Mexicans. French women who resemble English women are always thought the most aristocratic. (p. 156)

Sophie signifies differently to Americans than she does to the English, suggesting that the lines of resemblance and identity that Vico imagined only as radiating outward from Europe are actually multiple and multidirectional, so that Sophie—like Othello—cannot be fully understood at first glance and must struggle to proclaim her own identity. When a pair of tourists—“the man look like a gringo, but the woman look kind of Italian”—come in and sit behind Miguelita and Mosquito, Miguelita “turned as if she were talking more to them than to me,” and tells the story about Europeans’ perceptions of others’ nationalities again, except she tells it differently:

I was traveling through France with an Englishwoman, Jane, and she kept pointing out the quaint and cute little French villages, just like we do our Mexican villages. And when you see English movies about France they seem to always be set in these quaint little French villages and the French behave just like our Mexicans behave . . . But to the English . . . the French are sort of like our Cajuns or the way the French in Quebec are to the English Canadians. It’s all social status, Mosquito. France is England’s Mexico (pp. 156-57).
The two versions of the story reach the same conclusion, but the second version, recited to a possibly European couple, places Miguelita herself into a European context, traveling through the French countryside with her English friend. The normativity of Anglo culture and Miguelita's presumed place within it are underlined for the benefit of these new European visitors to the cantina, despite the fact that Mosquito believes that Miguelita has lost that social place: her husband met her on the Avenue in Texas City, not while traveling in the French countryside. The authority Miguelita may have wielded as a leisured European is almost completely absent, deconstructed, as it now consists primarily in the solicitous care her husband extends to her, as he would to any other invalid. Miguelita suggests a replicated Desdemona in a rewritten Othello, one whose husband survives to take her from Europe to his strange new world home where she, and not he, will always occupy a compromised, tenuous place.

As she begins freeing herself from a history of arbitrary cultural suppression and separation, Mosquito recognizes that the very circumstances of diaspora—separation and dispersion—have endowed her with perspective on several ways of being, and given her the freedom to name her own subjectivity. Indeed, the diaspora has made acts of choice and affiliation all the more necessary since it is impossible, as James asserts, to cancel history and claim some original African identity, and she is contemptuous of what she sees as other black people's attempts to do so. She remembers an occasion when she walked into a rehearsal for an African American theatre group where she "seen these African Americans dressed up like Africans, but Africans in the New World. Ain't real Africans. They own versions of Africa, African-Americanized Africans or some shit" (p. 117). Skeptical about the possibility of recovering some pure, uncompromised contact with her African roots, much less of making that contact the basis of a vision of diasporic identity, she insists instead on recognizing what Stuart Hall calls "the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences, and cultural identities that compose the category 'black.'" Discussing the fellowship she finds in her church, Mosquito explains,

Some members of the Perfectability Baptist Church are Negroes, others is colored people, others is blacks (with a small b), others is Black (with a big B), others is Afro-Americans, others is African-Americans (hyphenated), others is African Americans (unhyphenated), others is Just Plain Americans, others is New World Africans, others is Descendants of the Victims of the African Diaspora Holocaust, others is Multiracialists, others is Multiethnics, others is Sweeter the Juice Multiracial Multiethnics (these are people like myself who have other races and ethnic groups, like Mexicans, Irish, Greeks, and Italians in they ancestry but who resemble pure African gods and goddesses), others is Cosmopolitan Neo-Africans, others is African-Internationalists, others is
Through Mosquito’s eyes, the Perfectability Baptists represent blackness as both inevitable and constructed: socially real and theologically fundamental on the one hand, a prior whole dissolved and multiply invested with new meaning in the experience of the new world on the other. Fully aware of its own historical contingency, Perfectability’s assumption of a strategic racial essentialism—the congregation grants all members the freedom to experience and define their blackness as they choose at the same time as it also agrees that their blackness is an article of faith—paradoxically helps generate Mosquito’s awareness of the transactionality of her racial identity. She forms her sense of her own racial identity outside any single national culture, and outside any notion of national culture as being single and internally consistent. Instead, the novel’s pleasure in a rich hybridity occurs within a specifically historical understanding of its heroine’s position as the product and inheritor of specifically historic formations of black identity. Mosquito thus insists on having it both ways: recognizing the inescapable hybridity of modern black identity, but continuing to believe that there is something that remains particularly black even within hybridity.35

Like Othello, Mosquito is marked by the paths of several kinds of journeys: the crossings the heroine undertakes in defiance of arbitrary American borders, the linguistic journeyings back and forth between standard usage and personal invention, the appropriative journeys black Americans have made in search of the African roots they have believed will anchor them in the United States. In its emphasis on journeying women—Maria, who slips across the border to give birth in the United States; Miguelita or “Sophie,” who somehow ends up in Texas City; Mosquito herself, named Sojourner after the slave woman who escaped slavery—Mosquito further invokes not only a black Atlantic, but a circuit of even more broadly enculturated interchanges that is colored and flavored by its heroines’ New World experience and refuses to reinscribe black identity as merely the property of a simple nationalism. Othello’s overt appearance in the narrative marks another kind of cultural crossing, one which makes plain the different trajectories African American women and men can follow through diaspora as they attempt to authorize their own presence as “New World Africans.”

For Jones, these African American trajectories not only cross physical borders but also erode barriers between registers of discourse. An unabashed product of American popular culture—she loves Denzel Washington, Bud Light, Oprah, and “Afromance” novels—Jones’s Mosquito also, and perhaps more unexpectedly, commands the resources of high canonical western literature. Mosquito describes making love to Father Ray, the probable leader of the migrant underground, as a moment when she and
he are “circles and each the center of each circle . . . then we’s all things and each other. What my mama say about you's got to learn from everything in the universe! What my daddy say about claiming wisdom? Well, there's all kinds of wisdom. We's the entire universe and usselves” (p. 570). To my ear, Mosquito’s talk of circles and centers both evokes and revokes Donne as she remaps the poet’s play with geometry onto her own love for a man actively engaged in charting a newly unbounded political world. She announces her transgressive love in a poetic vocabulary that traditionally failed to recognize women’s independent capacity for desire, and conceived of male sexual longing as a way of staking territorial—and therefore, supposedly irrefutable—claims over women’s bodies. “O my America! My newfound land!” exclaims the rapturous lover in Elegy 19. 36 Donne was writing during a moment when older cosmographies were beginning to be displaced by new scientific cartography, generating new maps of a “new” world that would serve as both instruments and expressions of colonization as they granted Europeans naming rights over lands and civilizations. 37 By speaking Donne, Mosquito engages in more than the witty appropriation of a familiar metaphysical conceit to her own use, a woman’s use that playfully dislocates rigidly gendered hierarchies between language and culture, subject and object. Mosquito's invocation of the endless circle of desire and consummation she enters with Father Ray also proposes an alternative to the cartographic imperative emerging in the early modern period and erases lines of division and dominion that were drawn with increasingly rigorous scientific precision. When Mosquito describes how she and her lover dissolve the borders between their bodies and between their bodies and the world, she is speaking of a way of understanding space that, in this novel, will have political consequences. As they enter and belong to each other, they will also work to liberate the landscape from its colonial history of claiming and taming. “I bet Texas don’t know it ain’t Mexico,” she remarks (p. 149). Mosquito’s metaphysics invite us to speculate about the significance of reimagining space—geographical, sexual, national, cultural. This reimagination matters in a novel about undoing the damage wreaked by arbitrary borders. Mosquito’s reconception of discursive boundaries and reconfiguration of political and sexual horizons are emblematic of the work the novel does on Othello, another text produced during that early modern period of colonization and contact. In Jones’s hands, the play opens into a thoughtful meditation on the roles of American blacks as diasporic subjects, and as importers, consumers, and producers of international racial cultures.

Othello is a particularly well-chosen text for a novel as interested as this one in questions of cultural geography—that is, in relationships between people and their environments and how these are mediated by the exigencies of colonization. The play traces the consequences of a series of cultural
crossings: Desdemona’s defiance of her father’s right to choose her husband for her; the various adventures Othello endures on the way to meeting Desdemona and falling in love with her; the newly-married couple’s movement from cosmopolitan Venice to the farthest edge of the west in Cyprus; Othello’s transit from the African, woman-centered, erotically charged world in which he was raised—where his father cleaved to his mother because of the sexual magic she secured from an Egyptian sorceress—to patriarchal Venice. The Moor himself has been reacculturated by these border crossings, learning to judge himself by European valuations of skin color (“Haply, for I am black”) and national affiliation. Overcome by remorse after killing his wife, Othello believes his suicide is as necessary to the restoration of public order as were the many slaughters of the “turban’d Turk” (5.2.352) he has performed on behalf of the Venetian republic: he is so thoroughly the product of a Eurocentric imagination of original self and barbarian other that he believes he deserves to die.38

By the end of the novel, Mosquito has become “the official griot to the small New World African community of Cuba, New Mexico” (p. 614) whose very name speaks to the accomplishment of an America that recognizes and openly includes all its constituent parts. In this capacity, she listens as well as passes stories on. Not helpless before or only reactive to the power wielded by ancient story, she will be an active and discerning listener, one “able to distinguish between the stories that is wisdom stories and them that is trickster stories” (p. 615). Othello’s placement within the international and multiethnic frame of Mosquito’s New World setting throws the play’s power as an index of fixed racial and national affiliations into sharper relief. But in rereading Othello within its own larger fiction, Mosquito goes beyond merely reversing its tropes of exile, race, savagism, and gender, first in Miguelita’s story and then in Danny James’s novel. Its final accomplishment with the play is perhaps less sensational but more significant. In the newly made world that is its heroine’s goal, a world finally “independent” of white people’s sole power to name and to claim, Othello is deprived of its power to hurt. In its gestures toward a new world in which acts of union and communion will become more important than the acts of isolation and division that drive the Shakespeare play, and in which subjects are free to self-authorize their racial identities, Mosquito performs perhaps the most radical kind of revision of Othello. It lets the play fade away.
NOTES

2 Gayl Jones, Mosquito (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999). Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.
4 Carrie Tirado Bramen, “Speaking in Typeface: Characterizing Stereotypes in Gayl Jones’ Mosquito,” Modern Fiction Studies, 49 (2003), 129. Bramen’s discussion takes up an argument outlined by Ann duCille in “Phallus(ies) of Interpretation: Toward Engendering the Black Critical ‘I,’” Callaloo, 16 (1993), 559-73, which held that black male critics’ policing of black women’s writing both falsified the nature of art and privileged patriarchal hierarchies of gender over women’s claims of the right to speak for themselves.
5 “An open wound”; translation mine.
9 The novel’s fascination with food and new recipes is an apt image of its concern with syncretism and transformation. Mosquito describes how her friend Delgadina, bartender at her neighborhood cantina, sets out dishes of salsa for her customers: “Ain’t just salsa made with tomatoes and green peppers and jalapeños, but got papaya, pecan, and wild mushroom salsa. She say you can also put peaches and plums and any kind of exotic fruits in salsa. A lot of that salsa she makes herself. I told you about that salsa made with them mandarin oranges. They be calling them Mexicans and Chicanas the cosmic race, I guess that salsa a cosmic condiment or cosmic salsa” (pp. 145-46).
12 Gillies discusses Othello’s characteristically rich and highly figurative manner of speech as an aspect of his foreignness, p. 30.


14 See, for example, the 2009 Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative series by reporters Ryan Gabrielson and Paul Giblin of Mesa, Arizona’s East Valley Tribune on the anti-immigrant activities spearheaded by Maricopa County, Arizona’s sheriff Joe Arpaio at <http://www.eastvalleytribune.com/page/reasonable_doubt>. In March 2009, the Department of Justice announced it would begin an investigation of Sheriff Arpaio’s office for possible racial profiling and illegal searches and seizures.

15 While acknowledging the theatrical impact of the play’s solicitation of ideas about racial or cultural dominance, critics do not agree that it necessarily endorses them, especially since it was produced during a period when such ideas were still in formation. See, for example, Emily Bartels, “Making More of the Moor: Aaron, Othello, and Renaissance Refashionings of Race,” SQ, 41 (1990), 432-54; and Ania Loomba, “Delicious Traffick: Alterity and Exchange on Early Modern Stages,” Shakespeare Survey, 52 (1999), 201-14.

16 For discussions of some of these works, see Rob Nixon, “Caribbean and African Appropriations of The Tempest,” Critical Inquiry, 13, No. 3 (1987), 557-78; and Chantal Zabus, Tempests After Shakespeare (New York: Palgrave, 2002).


18 In Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), esp. pp. 177-206, Paul Gilroy mounted a controversial critique of contemporary black nationalism that focuses on what he sees as its retreat from programmatic political engagement into a romantic view of a sovereign individuality that it virtually always denominates as male. On women and gender within the Négritude movement, whose historiography has been strikingly male-oriented, see Brent Hayes Edwards, The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 119-85.


22 See, for example, Loomba, “‘Local Manufacture Made-in-India Fellows’: Issues of Race, Hybridity and Location in Post-Colonial Shakespeares,” in Post-


24 See, for example, Tyler Stovall, Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996).


32 At the risk of sounding pedantic, “Jim Dandy to the Rescue” was a late-1970s hit by the southern rock band Black Oak Arkansas.

33 Neill notes, “Anxieties about the treatment of race in Othello are a recurrent feature of both its critical and performance histories: where they once focused on the supposed scandal of miscegenation, they are nowadays more likely to address the play’s complicity in racial stereotyping” (p. 41). See his introduction on the history of performances of Othello and Desdemona, pp. 40-70 and 100-105.


36 See Tom Cain, “John Donne and the Ideology of Colonialism,” ELR, 31, No. 3 (2001), 440-76; and Shankar Raman, “Can’t Buy Me Love: Money, Gender, and
Colonialism in Donne’s Erotic Verse,” Criticism, 43, No. 2 (2001), 135-68.


37 Neill reviews the role of racial judgments in the history of Othello performance and criticism, pp. 36-70 and 113-38.