

## WHEN JAZZ BROKE OPERA: SOUND AND MYTH IN ...(*IPHIGENIA*)

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Way back there when Hell wasn't no bigger than Maitland, man found out something about the laws of sound. He had found out something before he even stood erect to think. He found out that sounds could be assembled and manipulated and that such a collection of sound forms could become as definite and concrete as a war-axe or a food-tool. So he had language and song.

Zora Neale Hurston (1991), 'Folklore and Music', 184

[M]usic and mythology were, if I may say so, two sisters, begotten by language, who had drawn apart, each going in a different direction—as in mythology, one character goes north, the other south, and they never meet again.

Claude Levi-Strauss (1978), *Myth and Meaning*, 54

As an anthropologist, I am no stranger to the importance of myth to both meaning-making and as connective tissue with ancestral forms of knowledge. Claude Levi-Strauss is synonymous with the study of myth in twentieth-century anthropology. Zora Neale Hurston, however, has only recently been reclaimed by the discipline of anthropology, even though she was both a student of Franz Boas—the so-called 'father' of American anthropology—and she conducted tireless ethnographic research in the US South and Caribbean for over forty years, focused on what she preferred to call folklore, or lies. Hurston is an important lens through which to interpret ...(*Iphigenia*) because Hurston's corpus catalogues the mythocentrism of African American and African diasporic culture. She created a mind-bendingly prolific body of both fiction and non-fiction work centered on myth and provides an important context for the connections being drawn in this opera between jazz and Greek tragedy: that of sound.

...(*Iphigenia*) by Wayne Shorter and esperanza spalding presents a reuniting of the two archaic sisters, music and myth, a return to a time when 'Hell wasn't no bigger than Maitland' where folklore and music were one and the same. According to Claude Levi-Strauss, there is a highly functional nature to the intertwining of music and myth, to their genealogical single point of origin; when united, they work towards the creation of a sensorium that conveys ethical, political, religious, and social meaning. This has been so for centuries. The various traditions of myth—be that folklore, legend, fable, epic, tale, psychoanalysis, etc.—are categorical distinctions that further influence the perceived veracity of the content, separated into religion, philosophy, or, as Zora Neale Hurston would call it, lies. Music

—‘art of the Muses’ in ancient Greek—further entrenches this relationship, the Muses having functioned as the source of knowledge for myths that were exclusively transmitted orally, sometimes accompanied by the lyre; according to Hurston, ‘it was found that the simple lyre was adequate to walk with the words expressing moods. The Negro blues songs, of which Florida has many fine examples, belong in the lyric class; that is, feelings set to strings.’<sup>1</sup> That there is a fundamentally sonic quality to both music and myth—both oratory and music being the primary means of mythological transfer—reveals the critical importance of sound to the durability of myth, of the importance of the lyre to the lyric and to the liar. To span centuries, myth has required far more than text. ... (*Iphigenia*) exploits this archaic relationship in a production that revives the ethical and political stakes for both music and myth through sound.

Act I begins set in dense-woods scenery, on a shallow stage with spotlights cast periodically from stage left and right producing a shadow play of femicide. The ritual sacrificing of women repeats *ad nauseam* until the audience is given a reprieve from the repetitive murders of Iphigenias (of the Sea, the Elder, the Younger, of the Light) in Act II. Not only is it noteworthy that legendary saxophonist Wayne Shorter and vocalist/bass player esperanza spalding have ventured into classical Greek drama with this work, but also that they interpreted this form into opera. Described as ‘jazz opera’, the production initially presents a mash-up parallel play in two genres: first, a jazz composition performed in its subterranean orchestra pit by the Berkeley Symphony and, second, the operatic vocals being delivered on the stage above.

Shorter and spalding’s jazz opera is itself a reclamation of an early twentieth-century form that often excluded African Americans, despite its jazz pretenses. Arguably born from the imagination of the ‘Dean of Afro-American composers’, William Grant Still, who was determined in the 1920s to produce a wholly modern and American version of the classical European opera by introducing ‘the pentatonic scale of the spirituals and the “blues scales” of the blues’, nevertheless it was George Gershwin and Jerome Kern who made jazz opera popular, taming it for Northern audiences.<sup>2</sup> Gershwin’s 1922 *Blue Monday* literally blackened opera by corking up an all-white cast in blackface, similar to Kern’s 1927 *Show Boat*; for them the jazz opera genre was a form of blackface minstrelsy. But beyond laying claim to the genre, could Shorter and spalding’s adaptation of Greek tragedy in jazz opera form be read as what Marvin McAllister has called ‘whiting up’, a centuries-long Black performance tradition that aims to ‘satirize, parody and interrogate privileged or authoritative representations of whiteness’?<sup>3</sup> Acts I and III foreground hyperbolic displays of white masculinity that can only be interpreted as parody, further drawing attention to the

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1. Hurston (1991), 185.

2. Murchison (2000), 49.

3. McAllister (2011), 1.

uncomfortable presence of Blackness, relegated as it is to the subterranean orchestra pit in Act I and to the signifier of spalding's body in Act III.

The stark contrast revealed in Act II seems to deflect this. Halfway through Act II, Iphigenia of the Open Tense joins the chorus of Sapphic sisters in a manner that *breaks* jazz out of the orchestra pit and into the opera on stage, performing what Fred Moten has described as 'breaking the signifier's logic'.<sup>4</sup> Jazz is not simply an ingredient in a hybrid fusion with opera; jazz is used in this production to *break* opera, to break into the whiteness of Greek tragedy. While Greek tragedy was never 'white' in the contemporary sense, its instrumentalization by white supremacists over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has overwhelmingly constructed it so. As Mac Sweeney et al. have argued:

References to classical antiquity appear with particular frequency in discourses that seek to construct cultural-racial identities. They occur most often within a vision of 'Western Civilisation' as a white-skinned, European-derived, racial and cultural heritage...with its ancestral roots in the classical worlds of Greece and Rome... Across North America and Europe the rise of the far-right has been accompanied by increasing interest in classical antiquity as the fountain-head of 'Western Civilisation'.<sup>5</sup>

Shorter and spalding intervene upon this white supremacist fantasy of the ancients by using jazz to both free Greek tragedy from this dubious instrumentalization as well as to liberate opera from its elitist confines.

In comes spalding as Iphigenia of the Open Tense, with radiant silver space suit, seemingly from another space-time dimension, representing what Michelle Wright refers to as a 'quantum' Blackness, unrestricted by progress narratives, appearing anywhere, anytime, including in ancient Greece among the Sirens.<sup>6</sup> Quantum time allows for a movement of time in infinite directions producing what Tavia Nyong'o discusses as a Black queer temporality he calls 'tenseless' or what Alexander Weheliye refers to as 'the future anterior tense'.<sup>7</sup> *esperanza* spalding's Iphigenia of the Open Tense is tenseless, not simply past, not simply future, but Open. This open tense furthermore eschews the linguistic dictates of opera opting instead for scat singing, that sensual-yet-non-sense improvisational performance of the voice as instrument. In a most striking manner, Iphigenia of the Open Tense performs a liquid scat singing of syllables composed entirely of vowel sounds, with no hard glottal stops, only soft, airy sounds. In the context of the chorus of Sapphic sisters, this so-called 'liquid' sound transforms them all into sirens with the power to charm the wind and lure sailors to their doom. Iphigenia of the Open Tense's siren song is a liquid form that bubbles

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4. Moten (2003), 103.

5. Mac Sweeney et al. (2019), 2.

6. Wright (2015).

7. Nyong'o (2018), 9, and Weheliye (2014), 125.

from the depths to the surface, producing what Fred Moten calls a ‘phonic materiality’ that animates and indeed inaugurates Shorter and Spalding’s strange amalgam called jazz opera.<sup>8</sup>

Artemis as the omniscient narrator (played, in the role of Usher, by Brenda Pressley) notes that it is through ‘Life’s grammar’ (Act II) that myths like Iphigenia repetitively entrap. ‘Life’s grammar’, or what Hortense Spillers has famously named an ‘American grammar’, is that symbolic order that, like myth, is maintained through its repeated citation in speech. For Spillers (and Artemis) the Black woman appears within that symbolic order only through negation, reifying ‘originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation’.<sup>9</sup> This results in an entrapment within the symbolic order into figures of monstrosity that lie outside of or beyond ‘the traditional symbolics of female gender’.<sup>10</sup> But, as Spillers concludes, ‘it is our task to make a place for this different social subject.’<sup>11</sup> This is precisely what happens next. When Iphigenia of the Open Tense improvises through an unwritten, unspoken, ungrammared liquid form, the myth cycle (for racial capitalism, family, misogyny, nation, etc.) that dictates all Iphigenias must be sacrificed breaks. Spalding interjects with scat singing to break the logic of a ‘Life’s grammar’ that entraps, ‘to rewrite, after all, a radically different text for a female empowerment.’<sup>12</sup> She writes with a text that is not a text, a non-discursive, non-linguistic, non-sense singing to break this logic. Sound can function in both manners here—to both break and carry myth. ...(*Iphigenia*) is thus what Vanessa Stovall has termed ‘mythophony’—any sounding or voicing of myth.<sup>13</sup> Stovall’s notion of mythophony insists that we consider the centrality of sound, the oral and aural means of myth’s delivery, which far exceed in occurrence the mythographic forms on which historical records are based. Opposed to mythography, mythophony recenters the sonic essence of mythic transfer, a reuniting of the twin sisters. It is an acknowledgement that myths can only ever become mythic through oral recitation and aural reception.

Like the saxophone, blown for over seventy years by Wayne Shorter, and Spalding’s voice, myths are wind instruments. Wind must be blown through pipes in order for what Levi-Strauss calls the ‘sense aspect’ of myth to be conveyed. This is the performative potential of myth-making. The sonic performative central to both oral recitation and aural reception is key to enlivening dead mythographic texts. Myth cycles are propelled not only through the elocution of mythic recitation but the perlocutionary effect this has on auditors. Breathing wind into myth is what the Euripidean myth of *Iphigenia in Aulis* and the Shorter and

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8. Moten (2003), 198.

9. Spillers (1987), 68.

10. Spillers (1987), 80.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Stovall (2021).

spalding jazz opera ...(*Iphigenia*) are about, that life force that functions as a vehicle for a speech act that is further enlivened when audited.

Whereas it is in the name of wind (which Artemis has halted) that Agamemnon's Argive soldiers set out to sacrifice Iphigenias in Act I, wind blown through spalding's pipes breaks the myth cycle of death in Act II. Iphigenia of the Open Tense becomes a scat singer who conspires with the Sirens to overwhelm the Trojan soldiers. In ...(*Iphigenia*) neither Artemis nor Shorter and spalding understand the ethics of wind's life force to be in its service to the marines of the Trojan war. This is indeed its most unethical application. Like the winds halted by Artemis as a form of revenge against Agamemnon's sacrifice of her sacred deer, winds that cease blowing represent a silencing, a voicelessness, a caesura of life force. Eric Garner's oft-cited 2014 utterance 'I can't breathe', which inaugurated Black Lives Matter and fomented a large-scale abolitionist movement against police brutality and systems of carcerality, was such a caesura.

Instead, like jazz, like myth, in ...(*Iphigenia*) wind as breath breaks the logics of war and the symbolics of Black death through liquid sounds that scat what Tricia Rose calls 'black noise' onto the stage of Zellerbach Hall.<sup>14</sup> In a mythophonic break, the whiteness of Greek tragedy and opera are shattered and the audience '[finds] out that sounds could be assembled and manipulated and that such a collection of sound forms could become as definite and concrete as a war-axe or a food-tool.'<sup>15</sup>

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14. Rose (1994).

15. Hurston (1991), 185.