

COUNTERMYTHOLOGIES: IPHIGENIA'S ANIMAL PART

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Early in the first act of Shorter and Spalding's ...(*Iphigenia*) the carousing band of Argive soldiers *cum frat* boys dumps the body of a deer stage left, close to the audience. A spotlight is trained onto the carcass, and there it remains: as the bodies of Iphigenias pile up alongside it through Act I; as the Iphigenias are revived and we enter a new conceptual plane in Act II; as the mythic plot reconvenes in Act III; and during the curtain call, when the cast, musicians, and crew come onto the stage to take their bows. At one point, I half expected the ensemble to smile wide and extend their arms towards the rigid body of the deer, inviting audience applause for their fellow performer, still, even now, fixed motionless under a spotlight.¹

In the Greek mythic complex with which this production is so deeply engaged, the deer simultaneously represents the inexorability of a plot once it has been set in motion, and the possibility of escape into another, alternative story.² In some versions of the myth, Artemis demands that Agamemnon sacrifice Iphigenia because he unwittingly killed a deer sacred to the goddess. Artemis instantiates a divine revenge plot, wherein she posits an equivalence or identity between deer and girl. The dead deer on the stage thus serves at some points in the production as a reminder that Iphigenia herself—or herselfes—is already a walking corpse. This sense is reinforced as, one after another, each Iphigenia is slain and takes her place beside the animal. Iphigenia of the Light, one of the Iphigenias who eagerly accedes to her own death, revels in this connection, as she brings another deer, this one roasted, onto the stage for her and the men to consume.

At the same time, in the perhaps interpolated ending of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*, and more securely in his *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, the death of a deer represents a sort of divine escape hatch out of the fate that has, up until the last moment, seemed foreclosed: as the knife hangs over her on the altar, Artemis replaces Iphigenia with a doe, and the girl is whisked away to live another story; in the *Iphigenia in Aulis* to a time and a place unknown, and in the *Iphigenia among the Taurians* to serve as a priestess to Artemis on the far shores of the Black Sea.

In a production about what it might mean to dissent from the demands of a predetermined myth and a predetermined fate, foregrounding (quite literally) the mechanism of mythic refusal indicates that the means of escape are never so far out of reach. But importantly, the liberatory vision of ...(*Iphigenia*) goes

1. See also Telò in this special issue.

2. See Haselswerdt (2022) for a discussion of the significance of the deer in *Iphigenia in Aulis*.

beyond the interpolated escape hatch emblemized by the deer in Euripides. Rather, the production imagines a flight from the compensatory logic of sacrifice altogether, from the framework in which, whether she eludes the knife or not, the value of Iphigenia's life is measured up and scrutinized, evaluated against that of a sacred deer, or against the potential horror and glory of the Trojan War.

For Shorter and Spalding, evasion of this model requires not a physical struggle, nor a goddess from a machine (though Artemis does intervene in a less direct way), nor an impassioned speech in which the heroine defends her position; this is not *Antigone*. Rather, it requires an (un)thinking and a (re)thinking of the nature of temporality, an effort to locate what Tavia Nyong'o calls 'the gap opened out between the possible and the potential, no matter how slight', that is, 'a sense of tenseless time...of particular importance to black and minoritarian subjects.'³ For Nyong'o, this gap is where Afro-fabulation might take place; not so much a specific critical strategy with a clear definition as it is a proliferation of oppositional, polytemporal performative strategies, ways of creating and accessing memory across diaspora. The temporal gap allows for the creation of minority 'counter-mythologies' that challenge hegemonic, propagandistic narratives.⁴ In ...(*Iphigenia*), the key to escape lies not in a direct and open resistance to the actions of Agamemnon and the Argive soldiers; it lies, rather, in a refusal to assent to the world and the timeline in which Iphigenia of the Open Tense has found herself. This requires not an act of physical resistance, but a collective act of world (un)building and (re)membering, the recollection of a community, a language, a song outside of time. The deer, unaffected by the radical shifts into and beyond time enacted by the other players in the drama, exists as *la durée* —'a coalescence between the sequential, tensed temporality of the ongoing present...and a tenseless time. The *kind* of fugitive time that allows for access to something beyond and for the emergence of the virtual.'⁵

In Act I, some of the Iphigenias attempt to struggle against the Argive soldiers. But this mode of resistance is still, unwittingly, participation in and assent to the demands of the myth. Think of Iphigenia in the parodos of the *Agamemnon*—struggling against her captors, crying out for mercy, attempting to meet the gaze of her father's friends to elicit some pity from them, to convince them to intervene and save her life. Aeschylus writes that in this moment Iphigenia stood out 'like a painting' (Ag. 242), that is, a timeless and iconic representation of the story and its inevitability in the relentless mythic machine of the Trojan War. While in Greek myth, as in ...(*Iphigenia*), Iphigenias iterate and proliferate, there are no extant ancient versions of her story where she is capable of exercising any agency in averting her fate.⁶ In the 'escape' plot, the switch is performed by

3. Nyong'o (2018), 10, cited by Bell (2023), 148.

4. Nyong'o (2018), 44.

5. Nyong'o (2018), 10.

6. Though, as Mameni notes in this issue, there are various iterations wherein Iphigenia decides to willingly offer her life for Greece. Mameni further explores the tension between Iphigenia's roles as a

Artemis in an instant, and in *Iphigenia among the Taurians* Iphigenia seems ambivalent, at best, about her role as a priestess of the goddess on the outskirts of the known world; her life saved, but its path still dictated by forces beyond her control.

Near the end of Act I of ... (*Iphigenia*), ‘the the Iphigenia’, Iphigenia of the Open Tense, emerges as a ‘disjunctive synthesis’ of the Iphigenias that came before her, and their competing tensed timelines: her iridescent jumpsuit containing the potentiality of all of the bold colors draping her forebearers, the crystallization of a refracted spectrum. Another aspect of her costuming—a horned headdress—casts her not only as the transcendent embodiment of all of the Iphigenias that came before, but also of the deer itself, as the entity that both instigates the myth and offers a way out.⁷ This Iphigenia’s hybrid humanimity in and of itself rejects the premise of compensatory sacrifice, tying together her own fate and that of her animal part. But on her own, ‘the the Iphigenia’ has no greater capacity for transcendence than any of the other individuals. Like the rest of them, she dies at the hands of her father, and her corpse lies alongside her human and caprid counterparts.

The Iphigenias will come together to build a polytemporal musical language in Act II of the opera. The grim forest backdrop of the opening act lifts, revealing the jazz trio at the back corner of stage right, and leaving the women themselves in a sort of ungrounded void. Each of the Iphigenias, who ended the first act as a multicolored tableau of corpses, awakens—minus, of course, the deer. In this space outside of time and place, a regal figure, perhaps Artemis, presides over the ‘improvisational solidarity’⁸ of the newly acquainted chorus of Iphigenias, coaxing them, coaching them, willing them to come together to build a new language—and, in doing so, a new temporality.

They take turns singing, separately and together, phrases and scraps of language, some sung only once, unfulfilled hypotheses, and some that stick, repeat: ‘sealed in the chrysalis of mythos’ or ‘and should the wind forget the butterfly that bore it?’ Though the language the women collectively build is rife with tantalizing images and motifs, it almost seems best not to attempt to analyze the libretto as poetry or performance script. As a philologist, it is nigh irresistible to treat my notes, scribbled with a dull pencil in the dark at the Broad Stage in Santa Monica, as a palimpsestic text of fragments to be poured over, to find resonance between the language of Act II’s libretto and the ancient Greek poetry that serves as a vessel for the Iphigenia myth. But what has been created here, by the strenuous effort of the Iphigenias, is not I think quite rightly to be considered a poem in English, though it is a collection of evocative English words and phrases; rather, it is half-remembered scraps of

sacrificial victim and a willing martyr, arguing that Iphigenia of the Open Tense disrupts this false choice by spewing vomit rather than blood.

7. Or, per Mammi, ‘a transpecies, transgendered human/stag’.

8. See Butler in this special issue for this phrase.

language pulled from the world of tensed time, repurposed into a new language beyond the comprehension of those outside of the collective. Many of these phrases are asyntactical, that is, they are extracted from the temporal logic that organizes a sentence or a thought and reorganized under the auspices of what some figures on stage call 'life's grammar'. It is a language that is, crucially, set to a sort of endlessly looping and endlessly reimagined melody, and in Act III, it is this melody, rather than any words, that will ultimately free Iphigenia of the Open Tense, the Tenseless Iphigenia, from the violence of the Tensed world. And it seems relevant to note that the culmination of these efforts, the sign that 'the the Iphigenia' is ready to return to and then transcend the plot, is a virtuosic, unverbilized exploration of melody, an improvisatory solo vocal performance by spalding that fully transcends syntax and language. As the scene shifts yet again and Gehry's aluminium structures lower into the background, Perhaps-Artemis admonishes Our Iphigenia: 'Remember!'

But when Act III begins, it is clear that our Iphigenia fails to remember the communally constructed world outside of mythic time, beginning the movement not as *The* Iphigenia but as *An* Iphigenia; she strikes a series of formal balletic poses and proclaims that her death will bring glory to Greece. The chorus of Artemis and fellow Iphigenias, apparently unseen and incapable of directly intervening in the action, look on in concern, wordlessly rehearsing the melody of the second act. Eventually, once Iphigenia of the Open Tense, 'the the Iphigenia', through an enormous act of will, supported by the melodic attendant chorus of her predecessors, finally manages to *remember* the world they constructed outside of time, in untensed tenseless time, the tensed teleological trajectory of the myth—and therefore the threat—simply collapses around her. Agamemnon and his Argives, poised to slit the girl's throat, suddenly become confused and disoriented, and listlessly wander away; the scene collapses, the myth's syntax disrupted.

The deer is the duration: both tensed and tenseless, the double to all the Iphigenias, representing both the strictures and potential transcendence of mythic structures. The deer, also, remaining onstage as the audience filters out, serves to complicate the tidy presentation of a story bounded by the trappings of the theater, the spell broken when the lights come up. It confronts the audience with a question, an invitation and a warning: what is it that *you're* forgetting, right now? To what constraints and structures of power are you assenting because you simply forgot to remember? Just as the haunting melody of the second act carries over into the third to remind Iphigenia that her mythic trap was an illusion, freeing her from a repeat of Act I, the deer stays with us beyond the third act and into waking life.