

## GO BACK AND FETCH IT: BLACK RADICALISM AND MYTHIC SOLIDARITY IN ...(*IPHIGENIA*)

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It is difficult to watch ...(*Iphigenia*) and *not* think of abolition. To bear witness to Wayne Shorter and esperanza spalding's opera is to experience the collision of classical and jazz idiom, the interruption of violent cycles, the emergence of liberation. Yet as much as ...(*Iphigenia*) is a story of abolition, it is also a story about the staying powers of sacrifice and myth. Winds that turn the wheel of oppression are the same blessed winds that propel ships out to sea. Furthermore, the interruption of inexhaustible, parodic virgin sacrifice is framed by the bodily toil that results from rejecting that cycle. We might easily observe ...(*Iphigenia*) as a retelling that moves myth forward, into the future. The last *Iphigenia*, of the *Open Tense* (performed by esperanza spalding), ultimately refuses her seemingly inevitable fate, retching out the words that might otherwise temporarily satisfy the whims of the bloodthirsty men around her. ...(*Iphigenia*), however, is a piece 'at war with itself'.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps in this way more than any other, it is able to communicate the tenseless timelessness of the Black radical tradition. The cyclicity of oppressive violence is the same cyclicity that dissolves artifice, the same cyclicity that produces solidarity as a substrate.

How might a Black feminist 'poethical' reading of ...(*Iphigenia*) reflect on the artwork in relation to the gears of raciality while also reflecting on its refusal to become an 'object of empirical anthropology'?<sup>2</sup> Joan Retallack defines the concept of 'poethics' as an embrace of life's complexity: a poetics thickened by an 'h' that 'launches an exploration of art's significance as, not just about, a form of living in the real world'.<sup>3</sup> Allowing our reading to be affected by this exploration is critical to understanding ...(*Iphigenia*) as a work that resists linear time and determinacy. Outside of Shorter and spalding's imagining of the *Iphigenia* myth, *Iphigenia* and her multiple iterations have been the target of endless and arbitrary interventions. Modern classical philologists have strived to separate the Euripidean *Iphigenia* from *alters* that have been 'silently fused with her'.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, by conceiving of ...(*Iphigenia*) as an opera that has been broken<sup>5</sup> and messed up by jazz aesthetics, Shorter and spalding evoke the retrospection and experimentalism of Black radicalism and revolutionarily embrace the intimacy between *Iphigenias*. The silent fusions of the past

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1. Chinen (2021).

2. da Silva (2018), 4.

3. Retallack (2003), 26.

4. See Telò in this special issue.

5. See Kheshti in this special issue.

become loud, haunting, and indigestible—all without the imposition of a singular meaning or direction.

In ‘Abolition as Praxis of Human Being’, Dylan Rodríguez defines abolition as an ‘artful disruption of the presumed futurity’.<sup>6</sup> We might similarly consider the idiom of jazz within ...(*Iphigenia*) as an artful disruption of both opera’s Eurocentric grammar and the myth that binds Iphigenia. For this reason it is important not to misunderstand jazz only as composition. ...(*Iphigenia*), I would argue, follows the familiar structure of an arrangement of a jazz standard. However, the story of any jazz arrangement is created to be improvised upon, to transcend simple linear narrative. The aim is to fracture and expand a familiar tune into something unexpected. It is specifically necessary to understand this aim as an affirmation of subversion. As jazz musicians, we compose and arrange on the underside of familiar tunes, moving forward and outward by looking backwards and inwards. Fumi Okiji notes that this ‘deviance from mainstream ideals and imaginings’ is what jazz works through, rather than liberty or democracy.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, the jazz structure and sounds of ...(*Iphigenia*) experiment through erring, tending, and rupturing. Destruction of what is known and familiar is, therefore, always already creative. Such ‘creativity of thought-in-destruction’ is a primary pedagogical purpose of abolitionist praxis.<sup>8</sup>

Before the lights went down in Zellerbach Hall, an ‘usher’ dressed in blue could be heard inquiring audience members about their pre-existing knowledge of the myth of Iphigenia. This introduction recalls the conversations that happen between jazz musicians reviewing a lead sheet: ‘Do you already know the changes to the tune we’re about to play?’ ‘So, are we supposed to just read the black and white?’ ‘Well, the arrangement opens up in the B section, you’ll see’. The first act of ...(*Iphigenia*), then, serves as the ‘head’ or the melody section of the jazz arrangement. Over the dizzying course of five Iphigenias, we see a story play out until it becomes ‘played out’: bellicose frat-boy soldiers itching to go to war as they sing and grunt in unison, winds that won’t blow their ships out to sea, the always-futile sacrifice of a deer/girl/woman (with varying degrees of non-consent), the desired breeze subsequently behind the men’s sails. By the time the final Iphigenia ‘of the Open Tense’ emerges, bodies of vibrantly clad women (and one deer) litter the stage, clearly dead but still breathing, alive somehow. When Iphigenia of the Open Tense sings, her voice is more of a ‘jazz voice’ and distinct from the other voices. Nonetheless, she speaks only by repeating the melodies and words of others. Her call-and-response is nonreciprocal, without selfhood, eerily reminiscent of Echo in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the nymph who foolishly seeks out Narcissus’ love. By the end of Act I, the audience feels bristlingly aware of the ‘head’ of the arrangement. We think we know the Iphigenia of the Open Tense’s expected fate.

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6. Rodríguez (2019), 1610.

7. Okiji (2018), 27.

8. Rodríguez (2019), 1611.

In the second act, the exposition of Act I begins to unravel. As with a jazz arrangement, after the 'head' is when musicians start to take solos and improvise. The structure of Act I falls away both literally and figuratively. The backdrop lifts, revealing a jazz trio of piano, bass, and drums in the corner of stage right. Shared yet individual acts of storytelling from each Iphigenia begin on this terrain that allows for solidarity with room to breathe and experiment. This time, the solidarity of the women is not a manifestation of listless corpses on stage. Their solidarity is alive and ungrounded. Notably, solidarity in this void-like space does not mean that each Iphigenia's struggle is subsumed. Instead, their newfound intimacy builds strengthened commitment in relation, cocooned within the framework of the Black feminist tradition.<sup>9</sup> Still, I would like to linger for a moment on the affective constraints of solidarity. After the revolutionary force of spalding's scat solo, she is admonished to not 'forget', to 'remember'. This sentiment evokes the remembrance of Black spirituality with its traditions of ancestral veneration and ritual. But what ugly feelings might arise from the connectivity of generational trauma? To what extent are Black people, especially Black women, expected to rupture cycles on behalf of the ones who came before us, bound by psychic and political obligation? As much as it is an honor and privilege to articulate loss in community, it is an unsettling feeling to then feel inspired to dismantle the very systems that produce our connection. From here, we are thrust into the third and final act of ...(*Iphigenia*).

After solos, a jazz arrangement will often come back to the head for what is sometimes called the 'arranger's chorus'.<sup>10</sup> Within the diegetic universe of a jazz arrangement, this section is where the sociomusical play of improvised solos continues to shine through. Even as the melody is restated, interconnected characters can experiment more freely. Act III of ...(*Iphigenia*) works like an arranger's chorus by cracking open the myth played out in the first act, but this renewal does not occur without hints of dissatisfaction toward the third act's collective futurity. Suddenly stiff and puppet-like, Iphigenia of the Open Tense appears possessed by the myth imposed upon her. spalding's voice has metastasized from the echo of Act I to an operatic, manic register. Iphigenia of the Open Tense seems to have forgotten all about the collectivity of Act II, now shockingly deluded by fantasies of martyrdom for Greece. But this is how the improvisation and refusal of ...(*Iphigenia*) really begins. Just as all hope for abolition seems lost, Iphigenia of the Open Tense seems to finally remember. She turns her back to the audience and begins retching, purging away her performance of martyrdom. In this regard, Iphigenia of the Open Tense takes on the role of the projective poet, transferring the energy of cyclical violence from the place where she got it to the stage and the audience. As Charles Olson writes in 'Projective Verse',

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9. Taylor (2017), 11.

10. Or, a 'shout chorus' in 'Big Band' arranging—although this term more specifically references the part of a chart where the whole band plays together, often with the brass sections in high-energy harmony.

a projective poet will move ‘down through the workings of his own throat to that place where breath comes from, where breath has its beginnings, where drama has to come from, where, the coincidence is, all act springs’.<sup>11</sup> Iphigenia of the Open Tense’s throat (the same throat that would be washed for sacrifice) becomes the place where her refusal comes from. Furthermore, when Iphigenia turns away from us, she embodies the kind of unexpected ‘turnaround’ chord progression that would bring a hard bop arrangement to its conclusion.

In the final moments of ...(*Iphigenia*), the chorus of Iphigenias move together upstage and away from the audience into an abyss. Their rainbow of clothes evokes familiar dreams of second-wave feminism. Each iteration of the myth, personified, takes a turn improvising, with their melody sung back to them by the other women. It is, perhaps, this moment that most represents the flatness of the solidarity between Iphigenias in Act III, a divergence from the individual-affirming solidarity of Act II. Despite presenting a real path for shared escape, it seems that their collectivity could be somehow misguided. What meaning might be produced by an alternate musical choice where the Iphigenias take turns improvising and allow these improvisations to generate further improvisation, beyond parroted melodies? Would this more adequately represent the experimental connectedness we most desire from abolition?

In Fred Moten’s reading of Frederick Douglass’s account of Black spirituals, he notes that moving in the tradition of Black expression requires devotion to both the happy and tragic possibilities of passionate utterance and response.<sup>12</sup> ...(*Iphigenia*) certainly moves in this tradition, but more importantly, is intentionally in dialogue with the past as a way of interrupting oppressive myth and retrieving what has been forgotten or lost. ‘You are all what the myth can’t bear’, the usher-as-Artemis tells the Iphigenias in the second act. ‘Remember that and what you are’, she says. Perhaps, we might see ...(*Iphigenia*) as connected to the symbolism of *sankofa*, a West African Akan philosophical tradition<sup>13</sup> that has remarkably influenced Black culture, especially in the United States. *Sankofa*, in conventional translation, means ‘to go back and fetch it’, referencing a proverb, ‘It is not a taboo to return and fetch it when you forget’,<sup>14</sup> and a symbol in the Adinkra iconographic system that shows a bird with its feet facing forward and its head turned backward, holding an egg in its mouth.<sup>15</sup> More than an axiom, *sankofa* is a Black diasporan practice. This reflexive temporality is connected to the broader philosophy of non-linear time in both Black spirituality and radical traditions. Abdul Alkalimat notes that the Sankofa principle is the most important principle in Black intellectual history.<sup>16</sup> I would

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11. Olson (1997), 249.

12. Moten (2003), 21.

13. Small, Barker, and Gasman (2020), 1.

14. Jeffers (2020).

15. The Spirituals Project (2004).

16. Alkalimat (2021).

argue that critical fabulation, jazz improvisation, and abolition are all connected to this intellectual tradition. ...(*Iphigenia*) not only synthesizes elements of these three practices, but goes back and fetches the fragmented pasts of previous Iphigenias and is attentive to them. Just as the corpse of the deer remains on stage throughout every act (even after the applause and bows from the cast), to embrace Black radicalism through experimentation is to embrace the cyclical, haunting remembrance of what might otherwise be forgotten.

The radical abolitionist struggle is not new or unprecedented. It is an unfinished project that precedes ...(*Iphigenia*) and all the myths we have been given. But like the abyss at the end of Act III and the spiraling coda that follows it, the creativity-in-destruction that characterizes abolition is necessarily opaque and elusive. An attempt to 'conquer' this opacity would be as misguided as any attempt to 'conquer' the undercommonality<sup>17</sup> that produces it. The reality that ...(*Iphigenia*) reveals is that everyone, all of us, enters the abyss—the Iphigenias, the usher, the audience, even the Greek soldiers. Everyone gets free. Yet in order to truly embrace the radically imagined abolition of ...(*Iphigenia*), we must embrace the interruption of myth as a disruption that's *been here* and can always be fetched, returned to, and improvised upon. Iphigenia of the Open Tense is not just a futurist rendering, she is an amalgamation of the Iphigenias that come before her, an embodied *sankofa* framework. The abyss she leads us all to is, therefore, not the end of the story, but a threshold of possibility.

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17. See Harney and Moten (2013).