

THE ABANDONED FEMININE: IN CONVERSATION WITH ESPERANZA SPALDING

Helen Morales and Debarati Sanyal

- Helen Morales:* We were blown away by the production of ...(*Iphigenia*) that we saw in Berkeley and have had so many discussions after it since and it's great to be able to talk to you about it, so thank you.
- esperanza spalding:* Thank you. I'm grateful to hear that. On behalf of all of the beings who labored so tirelessly for so long to bring it to fruition, I'm grateful to hear that.
- HM:* So can I ask first, are you going to return to it? I know you've called it improvisational, an improvisational work, but are you going to publish it in any form, or return to it in some way?
- es:* Well, we hope to do another production liberated from a lot of the space constraints, like venue constraints, and budget constraints, and time constraints that we were working within, to allow it the chance to just breathe into its full shape, and for us to also see what the opera can be when it has room, in every sense of the word. Not that it isn't beautiful already, but I think it deserves that. And Frank [Gehry]'s vision [set design] deserves that and Wayne [Shorter]'s vision [composer] deserves that. And Lileana [Blain-Cruz]'s vision [director] deserves that. So we definitely want to do it again in physical space, and I think we need to record it as well, but that's expensive. Everything is just expensive! And possible, but expensive. So those are our plans and we're just in the, you know, the process of bringing in the resources to make all that possible.
- Debarati Sanyal:* So it sounds like even the return to the piece will remain open and improvisational, right?
- es:* Yeah. I mean there are things in the libretto, there are things in Wayne's writing, there are things in Frank Gehry's set conception that we just weren't able to bring to life. We literally didn't have the space or the money to show what we meant in those ways, so—

- HM:* Could you tell us a bit about some of that? Could you give us an example of what sort of thing you would like to do that you weren't able to do?
- es:* Well, just to speak about it without going into all of the nitty gritty details—I don't know all of them—I know Wayne and Frank have this idea of the set being like a character, you know, not in the sense of being like an archetypal character, a character with a name, but that the engagement with the set, the movement of the set, the presence of a density in the sparseness of the set, and all the shifts and transitions between its states, is a part of the narrative, and we really weren't able to do that. That's also something that's in the libretto—in the libretto, the 'set', the world, if you will, is a character, and it keeps accumulating on itself, it's choking itself in the density of its own residue, or the calcification of its own development structure et cetera, and then there's this—we learn something about Usher's power, about Usher's world-building and world-altering, by the way that she's able to make it disappear, to make a pause in the density for this learning to take place. That's one thing. And I just remember seeing early drafts of Frank's set and there were just such presences in the space. It was almost like the characters almost felt like they barely had room, at first, in the immensity of this world and the fixedness of this world of Act I. And that would be really powerful to experience. And I feel like that presence, the immense presence of the world would have met the way Wayne wrote Act I. Because he was also seeing the set as alive, you know, and in movement and in relationship with the characters and the story. That's just one way.
- HM:* That's fabulous—thank you. I want to return to the Usher and to talk more about her later on. But would you like, Debarati—
- DS:* I would just be curious to hear you talk about ...(*Iphigenia*) as a 'jazz opera', which was how it was publicized. It's such an interesting juxtaposition and I guess I'd be really curious to know how you and Wayne Shorter were imagining and discussing the relationship between jazz and opera, libretto, orchestration, and improvisation.
- es:* Wayne and I never called it a jazz opera. I think that was an assumption put onto the work because of who Wayne is, although, you know, I think most people are also unfamiliar with Wayne's symphonic writing, unfamiliar with one of his instruments being the orchestra. He doesn't consider what he's writing for orchestra to be *jazz* writing—he considers it music—you know—writing, so we weren't discussing that, we were just dealing with the elements of the work that were there, you know? I mean part of Wayne's symphonic compositional style is assuming that a rhythm section is going to finish the orchestration by playing along with it and responding to it and improvising with it live, so that's always been a part of his symphonic aesthetic and the rhythm section that has for the most part performed within his symphonic works was a quartet, well, a trio, plus Wayne, of [bassist] John

Patitucci, [pianist] Danilo Pérez, and [drummer] Brian Blade. They were rhythm section players who had been under the tutelage of Wayne for years, you know, developing this co-compositional approach to improvisation.

I want to say something about the technology or the technique of responding compositionally to whatever is happening. They sometimes may have a song structure to play with, but Wayne or anybody may intercept the trajectory of that ‘composition’. For decades they’ve been developing this practice of real time arrangement in composition in response to the world, the music world, that’s coming at them, or the circumstance of the space, a mistake somebody makes, a cough in the audience, a color that Danilo plays unexpectedly. So we knew that was a dimension of the orchestration, and, because of the story we were telling, and the way we were telling the story, this kind of constant, flowing, unscripted presence came to be associated with this Usher character, with this undomesticated, earth mother spirit, aka Artemis really. And also with this entity or this phenomenon that is personified in the character of Iphigenia—of the yet-to-be-socialized, kind of like feminine fecund constant. In the orchestration we play with the way that this improvisational element or current pushes through the symphonic fixedness or gets overwhelmed by the symphonic fixedness, or merges with it, or enters it and alters it—you know, in a way this churning, responsive, unscripted improvisational responsiveness is itself a character. And the, like, brah! [gestures] immensity of this fixed orchestration is another character as well.

DS: But it seems of a piece too, right, because you’re blasting open the myth of Iphigenia and her horrific sacrificial destiny and it seems as though the improvisation is obviously part of blasting open the myth...

es: Yes, it is part of the story of blasting open the myth. As you were saying that I was remembering that Lileana and I, with Wayne and Frank, were having these discussions about how challenging it is to portray another force affecting reality, how hard it is to portray the idea that the receptive, the not-yet-formed, the responsive—the receptive, responsive, formless—as a presence and a force impacting the fixed, how difficult it is to portray that because we don’t have a lot of symbolic associations with that idea, just culturally. I don’t think we’ve seen a lot of physicalized expressions of that idea or that relationship, so in a way we had to do a lot of that with sound. Even that phrase ‘blasting open’, that terminology to me—I use that terminology too—in the context of ...(*Iphigenia*), and that concept of affecting material reality, of blasting open to make change is so very much part of the patriarchal militaristic ideology of Act I. So even as we’re trying to imagine what other ways does this other power, this other power of divinity, power of the earth, influence, impact, we risk slipping into or mimicking or mirroring the problem-solving philosophy of the militaristic ideology that it’s attempting to modify. It’s so trippy—the work was really trippy—I’ve noticed like

how challenging it was to deprogram ourselves from how we tend to think about change.

DS: Is that maybe why Artemis/Usher kind of takes over or displaces Clytemnestra—or is the mother somehow embedded in this militaristic patriarchal forest...?

es: Yeah, I really, I know that we don't have Clytemnestra in the opera—Clytemnestra is a hard character—she's really challenging, and I haven't found a way to recognize energetically what she is essentially. I also have to remember that all of the versions of the story, all of the translations, the composite versions that have arrived to us through the jurisdiction of Greek scholars and whoever transcribed for the first time what surely were oral histories, or stories, are coming through the lens of men, and men's prejudices or associations or projections on these women, these female characters. And Clytemnestra is buried in so many layers of projections of what the mother is, and the disempowerment of the mother in the militaristic system, I didn't feel I could reach her, but I feel that Iphigenia was such an obvious expression of the abandoned feminine and the abandoned innocence within the men. I could access her, and I could also sense Artemis operating in a clandestine way within this story. So to me she's not necessarily a composite or a surrogate—a composite of Clytemnestra or a surrogate for the character of Clytemnestra—but she's really Artemis, she's really that figure.

HM: Do you think of the Artemis/Usher character as a kind of *dea ex machina*? I think you said something like 'she makes it disappear'—she solves things in the end—did you see her through that lens?

es: No. More the way that John de Conquer—I don't know if you are familiar with that 'myth', but John de Conquer a trickster figure who embedded himself within enslaved populations and could through humor cause interceptions in the inevitable flow of brutality, and he could also cause people, in the places where they were, to travel to another place. Zora Neale Hurston has a great telling of the histories and exploits of John de Conquer,¹ and in one of them the enslaved people are on a dinner break and they are visible to the masters, the 'overseers' sitting on the porch of the plantation house, but John de Conquer comes over to them and, even though they appear to still be physically there, he is able to take them somewhere else, and when he takes them somewhere else they learn all of these truths about the world around them—about heaven, about hell. When they 'come back' they have taken this trip and time has passed in one way but in another way nothing's changed. I feel that the powers of the laws, or the powers of Usher, are more along those lines, similar to so many portrayals of the deities or the

1. As told in Hurston (1943).

orishas. They can only do so much, they can only intercede so far, because, essentially, it's a human production; humans are essentially making the laws and the rules of this world, so the best that our Artemis can do is try to intercept the tension, or intercept perception. You know even in the second act, the dropping into this other—I almost want to say truth behind the facade of the world as we know it—to me is less like she's actually stripped away the physical materialities of this world and she's almost like [turns away sharply] finding a way for this being to get into their head, like John de Conquer, and see the truth behind it. Hopefully, with that understanding, when their head is turned back to reality again, they won't forget what they know. I really feel that the Zora Neale Hurston tale of John de Conquer is very powerful, is very potent.

HM: You talk about Iphigenia as 'the abandoned feminine' within the men. That's a really compelling way of thinking about her character, but it's one that places her in relation to the men. How do you think about her, if you do, as an individual, and in solidarity with the other Iphigenias?

es: While I was on the journey of learning about this character through the translations and tellings of this story, and reading about her in Tauris, I kept being tickled by the fact that men are writing this, that this may or may not have ever been an actual humanoid who walked the earth. You can imagine so many parallels to this dynamic of a young woman being given a false choice, when really there is no choice because she's already been targeted and identified as the linchpin in some plan of the structure around her. Something shifted and I thought, 'Oh yeah, these are men telling stories about their culture, these are men telling stories about how they are seeing the world.' And right then—whoa!—the shapes of her started to change; the implications of her words, the implications of the arcs of the story started to change. I should say when I first came into this project, I wasn't the librettist, I was just helping Wayne. I was just trying to learn about what Wayne wanted to do with this opera; I was just reading alongside him to feel more informed as I sought out other people to help make his opera happen. And I didn't see the Iphigenia that Wayne wanted to write an opera about in any of the writing about her. He was talking about this heroine who was neither comedic nor tragic, but who represents a singularity, something that has never happened before. He was painting this figure who alters the world around her, and I was just not seeing that person. So there was a rift between what I was actually reading and what Wayne was receiving from this archetypal character. I really trust Wayne, I really trust his insight, I trust what he perceives through the immediately legible patterns of things. So many times in our friendship he's said things that didn't make sense to me and years after, wow!—the metaphor

downloaded or the historical implication downloaded or whatever—so in that dissonance maybe, this question opened up: What if she's been this latent, yet to be opened like sealed envelope who's traveled through time, you know? Who and what she actually is has been hidden, and Wayne is sensing that there's something in there that's gotten occluded by the telling of the story, so I think that the dissonance and the tension opened up a way for that question. This somehow made me think, well, what are the things in oneself that we have to sacrifice to be able to justify going to war? What does one have to sacrifice really? And then Iphigenia started to feel not a metaphor, but in a way like an archetypal embodiment of that innocent knowing, of the sacred feminine, of the preciousness of youth, of the preciousness of *life*. To get yourself in a headspace of 'Yes, I'm going to go to war and do anything and kill anything that stands in my way', you have to sever that knowledge from yourself. To be able to rationalize and move forward in this conceit of war, you have to sacrifice that dimension of yourself. So then I started to feel that, in a way, she's the surrogate for Artemis talking to that dimension in the men. It could be seen as that dimension in these people awakens and they remember what they already know, and, in that remembering of how we are not going to fucking kill this part of ourselves, the thing can't go on, something else has to happen.

Then to your point about her as an individual and in solidarity with the others, I mean, she's like an entity that maybe has two truths. She is in a way a surrogate for the dimension of the male psyche, but she is also a woman that these projections end up brutalizing, you know, so as she's meeting the other iterations of herself, you know, the other beings who are the aftermath of this way of relating to themselves and to other humans, it's like, maybe a reckoning that, 'Oh, what I think I'm doing is not as special as what I think it is.' You know, it's something about having to see the actual price of the continuation of sacrifice. There's so much that could be said about that, but I guess that's a starting place: she is this surrogate representation of a part of the inner perhaps male psyche or militaristic psyche, and she's also the archetypal embodiment of the disenfranchised, the brutalized, for the sake of pursuing these aims.

DS: That's so interesting. Can I ask you a little bit more about Iphigenia—that figure who is multiplied, that is kind of wrenched out of its determined fate, and open to possibility and multiplication—it seems as though in addition to being a figure that is disavowed in the masculine, military complex or an archetype, the figure of Iphigenia is also a kind of archive, a memory, of countless virgin girls that have been sacrificed, and the imagining of different destinies for them. I think in one interview you actually talked about Iphigenia as a figure for the unseen and the unremembered, and I was really curious to know more about who some of these unseen and unremembered figures are who emanate from your

Iphigenias. When I was watching the production, I kept thinking of the scholar Saidiya Hartman, who actually finds traces of disenfranchised Black girls in early twentieth-century newspapers, prison records, the writings of social reformers.² And there are some suggestive connections between ...(*Iphigenia*) and Hartman's critical fabulations where she's constructing these lives that were unremembered and unseen and that really resonated for me in terms of the way you revisioned Iphigenia.

es: Hmm, that's so curious.

DS: So, historical unseen and unremembered Iphigenias that are somehow being pulled out of anonymity.

es: Hmm. That's a lot. What's coming up is just thinking about how vulnerable any of us are when we're cut off from our lineage, when we're cut off from the stories of sacrifice, or cut off from the true histories underlying our present tense, you know. I think about US citizens who don't know about the history of genocide in the United States, like not knowing what kind of aftermath we're in, and how we're being wooed by the forces that want to continue the systems of oppression. It's a very, very vulnerable and dangerous position. And as much as the story certainly is about women, and certainly about the ways that women can be, I think the whole story is about that, and Euripides' story is about that: we can be swayed from our better knowing, all of us can, under this pretext of a larger purpose. Iphigenia, particularly in terms of who she might represent in a historical sense, specifically represents people who are swayed. It's not just someone who's kidnapped, or someone who's brutalized, or assaulted, it's a person who convinces themselves that they are consenting to their brutalization, who gets wooed by the narrative, who gets wooed by the narrative of self-sacrifice for this idea of nation, or for this idea of family, or for this idea of progress, or valor, or dignity. She's in that calibration maybe, that particular type of 'I know better, but I'm being wooed'.

DS: Helen and I were just talking about that beautiful interruption or hiatus that is Act II, that is this opening out of tense, and then this shift into Act III and we were kind of wondering, you know, how, when you were performing, you experienced moving from Act II to Act III where we move from this idyllic space of improvisation, possibility, connection, and perhaps understanding—it seems like—back into myth, at least until the moment of the retching. I would love to hear about what it felt like for you as a performer to move from these ethereal vocalizations of Act II into the final act where it feels that the military machine is going again.

es: Gosh, there were so many things going on. The first thing that's coming up is like an image or a sense or a concept that has come to me through

2. Hartman (2019).

Buddhism—this idea of the sermon in three places. Not that Iphigenia is giving a sermon, but I guess the simplest way I can think to describe it is that there's a very profound learning that happens in this world, an awakening, and then that awakened figure goes to heaven, and counsels with the heavenly beings about this awakening, and it's almost like the awakening comes into its fullest potential in this other realm, this ascended dimension that's not the earth realm, but essentially the awakening only really matters when it comes back down to the earth, because that's the plane where the enlightening actually functions. There's this shift—there's this turn—to be able to perceive another dimension of truth and then everybody goes into this parallel dimension and the learning is instilled, the learning coalesces, it coagulates, it's experienced. A more integrated truth comes into this being, you know, and they're able to experience it fully without any of the hindrances of the world that they left, but it doesn't matter there, in a way, because they live in that world, you know, so the coming back in is almost like 'Okay, now you have to take this, what you just learned here, and you have to embody it now, in this world when you come back.' And something about that character when they come back is—woop!—immediately swept up again in the rigamarole of the world as we know it, you know.

And then, to what you were speaking about before, about the narrativizing of these unknowable beings, one way of interpreting it is that they are the spirits of these other beings that are committed to this next Iphigenia. They are committed to taking what they learned and helping her not make the same mistake they made. I guess I just want to make it legible that for me, as a writer, it's not that Iphigenia miraculously remembers on her own in Act III and does not consent to the sacrifice. Yes, she remembers, but it's also thanks to this presence of the ancestors, this presence of these other beings who have the capacity to reach her in this world. And I feel that this is really important to articulate too; we really wanted not to slip into the hero industrial complex and have it be like 'Oh, she's the hero and she saved the day', but have it really be that she's able to make this different choice, thanks to the combined influence and affect of all of these forces, and multiple women who are standing by her, trying to reach her from the other side and say 'Girl, no, no, no—remember!' Maybe that was our way of trying to portray another version of her presence within the myth because every other time we meet her in the myth she's so alone, you know. She has her 'attendants' but, essentially, we really experience her as being very isolated from any real infrastructure, any real counsel, any real sisterhood. And so it's something about the idea of: you're in this world, you have an awakening, the awakening comes together outside of this world, like in heaven, or on a

parallel plane or whatever, but then you have to come down here and practice it here, but it's not that she's practicing alone.

DS: What's so remarkable is what that moment sounds like when she refuses her consent. The refusal takes the form of a retching—I would love so much to hear about how you came upon that, that the refusal would come up as a retching, that then slowly, gorgeously, mutates into choral singing.

es: Yeah, what's coming up...there are so many so things to be said about that. I read this very wonderful review from a Classics scholar—I think she's a sister—she is a sister—

HM: Vanessa Stovall?

es: Yeah. There was a lot of critique in the review, but I was particularly tickled to see how many subtexts she picked up, that we weren't trying to make explicit, they just happened to be subtexts for us, as storytellers.³ It was so deep to know that all these things were legible if you really know Greek mythology. One thing that she reflected on or received from the retching is the acknowledgment that it's undigestible—like not trying to digest the undigestible—allowing the body to have the honest response to what you're being asked to do. And not override that very natural, understandable, inevitable (I want to say, not inevitable because you can kinda stop it), but healthy response to being asked to swallow a thing like that, and digest a thing like that, so that's a dimension of it.

HM: I was reminded of the retching earlier in this discussion when you were talking about how all of the different tellings by men 'choked' the female characters—you used the word choked—that was just an interesting connection, because the retching is in some ways a stopping the choking.

es: Yeah... I think sometimes when we're writing, and I'm sure you both experience this, and probably anybody reading this has experienced this, sometimes when we're writing, our subconscious makes a connection before our conscious does, and it might come out as an impulse, to put something there that you don't fully understand yet, and then as you write you realize, 'Oh, okay, I see why that matches that'—you know. And at first, that's what the retching was, for me. Like I felt that's what happened there, and what actually happens in the libretto is that she vomits this gush of water, and then she fishes out of it, this—I don't know how to explain it—I mean it's in the libretto—you could of think of it like an eye, but she slicks it on her chest, and then that's what opens, like the opening of the world as we know it opens from there, and that's the portal out of which people leave, which I know is impossible to do on the stage. It's also something about maybe the

3. Stovall (2021).

things that we swallow, the things that we take in, that are not to be taken in, and working with them in another way, like allowing them to be worked with outside of the body without internalizing them, is what allows their light and function to emerge. That's a lot. I think I have to pause on it. I have to like remember and go back to what is happening there, but that's what I can say for now.

HM: Oh, that's beautiful. And it was one of the most affecting moments in it—that was an extraordinary theatrical moment—the retching and the vomiting...

DS: ...and then its transmutation into collective song that was, again, improvised, I think?

es: Oh, yeah, yeah, it was. I've just remembered, there's something about admitting what you cannot take. Admitting what you cannot handle. And something about that being the opening for the support, you know. It's like saying, 'I don't care what happens. Kill me if you must, but I am not doing this.' And the daring to not succumb to the 'either/or' that you've been presented with—that daring is a very dangerous, vulnerable place, and so I feel that part of the retching is like some part of you is overriding your mind. It's totally legible that you can't: 'I cannot take this! I cannot digest this!' And that's what breaks whatever barriers there are between her and this support, her and these spirits, this lineage of all the women, all these Iphigenias back through time, who are now able to come to her, and lift her up and collectively alter this reality. And it is improvised. From there, everything's improvised. There's one moment that may or may not have translated where there's an attempt to bring the orchestra back in, but it doesn't work—in the story it doesn't work—they try to make it happen, but it's too late. Everything from that moment is improvised.

HM: Thank you. One of the things that we found ourselves disagreeing about, and having heated discussions about, is the movement back into Act III. We could not agree on whether or not the end was despairing, a touch nihilistic, people going into the abyss, or to what extent it was an opening up, a new beginning. I know you don't want to be too prescriptive, and I'm not inviting you to do that, but if you could say something about what you envisaged for the ending that would be helpful.

es: Well, what I wish for, for the ending, is that anyone who stages it collectively divides the ending. Because part of what we wanted to trouble was the tyranny of the singular narrator, the singular agenda of the storyteller, so what I want to do as a storyteller is bring us up to that point where there's a 'No'. The story now can no longer continue the way that it was planned to continue. And after that vomit and after the helmets crack off, from that point, the goal in the libretto is that it needs to be a co-devised ending, one that hopefully requires the real time intimacy

and responsivity of improvisation, and for the music to underscore whatever happens. So that's actually the ending: we don't know what would have happened if she'd have said 'No'. We don't know, and I don't want to fix it in what I think or wish would happen. It was *the* version that we could do with the time we had, and it wasn't as co-devised as I would like—I mean, everything that happens musically is a clearly...no one knows what people are going to do, you know, but the shape of it, and the pathway of the action was devised by Lileana and me, and we hope that people won't emulate that version. But we really hope that there are as many ideas of what will happen to the ending, as they are groups of people who put it on.

HM: Is there anything that you would like to add or put out there?

es: I'll just say that I learned a lot about our expectations, the expectations that we take into the theater, of wanting to be wowed, and of looking for a high from the work, and I just was noticing that at least the theater, the opera, as we've become acclimated to it, really plays into a kind of addiction to be highly scintillating—it's kind of a demand, you know—if we're not feeling drawn along or scintillated, it's kind of boring, you know: 'Why am I watching this?' To a certain degree we didn't have time to do a lot of the choreography, so there was a kind of need that emerged for Act II to be very quiet, like very still, and I just, I noticed how difficult it was for some people to just sit still and listen to these women talk. And it was hard for me too. I also noticed how I have been programmed to expect—people on the stage, women on the stage to be like, 'Well, give me the thing that I came here to get'. And I feel that it was really healthy for the meta-meaning of the opera for us to just have to sit there, just sit and not be wowed. I mean, the music's so beautiful so you're always wowed, but just sit and hear these women speak without the performance for the first time ever, you know, speak as themselves, and in that act their testimonies are written by three poets: Joy Harjo, Safiya Sinclair, and Ganavya Doraiswamy, three beings from lineages of a lot of brutality against their women and a lot of brutality against the feminine sacred in their cultures. It was an interesting two-way reckoning of 'Ugh, that's what audiences want, and also oh my god that's what I want too'—I've also been programmed to find it difficult to just receive these testimonies. I'll just say that if people ever put the opera on again, I would encourage people to lean into that discomfort, and just lean into what it brings up. Why is this so hard, to sit and receive these tellings, the voices of these women?