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CLASSICAL DIFFUSION

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At Howard University, the only historically Black university in the United States with a Classics department, campus leaders decided in 2021 to eliminate that department after a three-year review of its academic programs. The response was vehement and swift, with students, faculty, and alumni condemning the decision as a case of administrative overreach. The philosopher Cornel West described the divestment from the Classics curriculum as a 'spiritual catastrophe' for the institution. Few missed the irony that Toni Morrison, one of Howard's most celebrated alumni, studied with Frank Snowden, Jr., a renowned professor of Classics, and received a 'minor' in that field as an undergraduate; or that the central inspiration for Morrison's *Beloved* was a fugitive slave woman named Margaret Garner who became known as 'the modern Medea' for having decided (in 1856, in flight from her master's agents) that it was better to kill her children than see them returned to enslavement in the American South. Others would point to the long tradition of transformational Black thinkers who admit to having been inspired by the classics, including Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr.

The tradition of Black Classicism is long and deep. What does it mean for an institution such as Howard to turn away from the classical tradition after more than a century in which Black artists have immersed themselves within it? Can Black writers, thinkers, and artists disentangle themselves from the classical tradition? Are the classical tradition and the Black tradition even separate traditions? Classical references course through Black art, from Zora Neale Hurston's espying hints of Caesar's high bridge in an instructor's visage, through Charles Chesnutt's channeling of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in *The Conjure Woman*, to Romare Bearden's routing of Homer through the Great Migration. Even the Fugees allude to the Sword of Damocles in their song 'Zealots'.[1]

In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, the paradigmatic fugitive slave narrative, the author makes clear that the pivotal moment in his journey from slavery to freedom occurs when he discovers the power of classical rhetoric.

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[1] In her memoir, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston (2006) wrote, 'There is no more dynamic teacher [than her night-school instructor Dwight O.W. Holmes] anywhere under any skin. He is not a pretty man, but he has the face of a scholar, not dry and set like, but fire flashes from his deep-set eyes. His high-bridged, but sort of bent nose over his thin-lipped mouth—well, the whole thing reminds you of some Roman like Cicero, Caesar or Virgil in tan skin' (155). Romare Bearden created his 'Odysseus Series' in 1977—a cycle of twenty collages and watercolors based on Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*: see O'Meally (2008). On classical references in hip hop, see Padilla Peralta (2015). Additional major touchstones in Black Classicism include Eccleston and Peralta (2022), Goff and Simpson (2007), Greenwood (2010), Rankine (2006), Roynon (2013), and Walters (2007).

He recounts that as a very young man, in 1830, he took 50 cents earned from polishing boots and bought himself a copy of Caleb Bingham's 1797 schoolroom textbook *The Columbian Orator*. Before acquiring this textbook, Douglass described himself as living in a world in which slave masters seemed to be in control of the literal and slaves were consigned to the sphere of the figurative. Slaves prattled on in an 'unmeaning jargon' and sang 'rude and apparently incoherent songs' before the rigorous literality of overseers such as Austin Gore, whose 'words were in perfect keeping with his looks, and his looks were in perfect keeping with his words'.[2] The aptly named Gore and the Great House Farm were perfectly matched when it came to terror: 'He was just the man for such a place, and it was just the place for such a man.'[3] Gore possessed 'all those traits of character indispensable to what is called a first-rate overseer', not least the power of literalization, the power to twist and translate the slaves' every gesture and word into meanings that reinforced his power: 'He was one', Douglass writes, 'who could torture the slightest look, word, or gesture, on the part of the slave, into impudence.'

How surprised Douglass was, then, to find in *The Columbian Orator* a dialogue between a master and his slave in which the tables appear to have been turned, with the slave in this case wresting from his master the force of literalization:

> Among much of other interesting matter [in *The Columbian Orator*] I found in it a dialogue between a master and his slave. The slave was represented as having run away from his master three times. The dialogue represented the conversation which took place between them, when the slave was retaken the third time. In this dialogue, the whole argument in behalf of slavery was brought forward by the master, all of which was disposed of by the slave. The slave was made to say some very smart as well as impressive things in reply to his master—things which had the desired though unexpected effect; for the conversation resulted in the voluntary emancipation of the slave on the part of the master.[4]

Cicero is among the ancient figures featured prominently in *The Columbian Orator*'s speaking exercises, and from the moment he acquires the book Douglass begins an intense study of Cicero and classical rhetoric more broadly. Douglass is deliberately casting himself as a Black Prometheus, stealing the fire of rhetoric from his Olympian overlords to give it to his human brethren (his fellow slaves).

As Jared Hickman argues in his book, *Black Prometheus: Race and Radicalism in the Age of Atlantic Slavery*, the myth of Prometheus itself contains the seeds of the divergent claims to the Promethean legacy.[5] The myth, once Africanized, works to justify Black resistance and rebellion against slavery and white hegemony. Douglass's blackening of the Prometheus myth is a possibility that always lay in wait. In 'stealing the fire', reversing the terms of the literal and the figurative, power and powerlessness, Douglass remakes himself out of the stuff from which he had been made.

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[2] Douglass (1986), 57 and 66.

[3] Douglass (1986), this and following quotations: 65.

[4] Douglass (1986), 83.

In this sense, Douglass inhabits the state described in *…(Iphigenia)* as the 'open tense'—the sense, according to Artemis, that Iphigenia has awaken inside her own myth, uncertain as to whether she represents its past, present, or future. As Sunder Ganglani, the dramaturg, asks: 'How often have you suddenly woken up from the one [dream] you didn't know you were playing out, or rather the one that was playing you out?' I said earlier that the myth of Prometheus contains the seeds of the divergent claims to the Promethean legacy, that the myth contains the conditions of its own undoing. Something similar is being proposed regarding the myth of Iphigenia in the Shorter-spalding production. The 'open tense' may be acknowledged, per the libretto, as 'what the myth can't bear', but it is also what the myth produces: the 'cracking of cemented myth' contained within the myth itself—'to carry what could come'.

In 'On Dressing Down Myth', Vanessa Stovall offers something in the way of a theory of the open tense.[6] In our efforts to think the relation between Blackness and the classical archive of myth, the best we can hope for, Stovall suggests, are 'echolocations' within a mythical matrix of 'desire and intimacy'. In *…(Iphigenia),* the ellipses perform this function of echolocation. The ellipsis, that distinctive punctuation made up of other punctuation, seems almost a sign or symbol of myth, of mythic self-fashioning. Its orientation is *retrospective*, pointing toward vague antecedents and precedential values. It also *interrupts*, marking our arrival *in medias res*, in the midst of an action or a gesture already on its way to completion. And, finally, it signals *our tardiness and belatedness*—suggesting that we have arrived too late, but in the belief that what we have to say hasn't yet been said. A mark always gesturing toward past, present, and future, the ellipsis is the punctuation of the 'open tense'.

I take one implication of the 'open tense' to be that we can never say, with confidence, that we are seeing the past, present, or future of the myth. In this respect, the Shorter-spalding production confronts us with a curiosity. In Act II, Iphigenia, having become aware of herself as 'open tense', as 'what the myth can't bear', appears to say '*No!*' to her sacrifice, signaling that liberation through improvisatory flights of melody, as well as nausea and retching and vomiting. In Act III, however, as Ganglani writes, 'we're back in it'. Iphigenia 'is forced back into the myth', and we are confused. *What are we to make of Black art, Black voice, Black aesthetics forced back into the constraints of*

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[5] Hickman (2016).
[6] Stovall (2022).

'cemented myth'? The answer to this question lies not in the sequencing of cause and effect, before and after, mythical enclosure and resistance to it. An answer may lie in echolocation between Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*, Shorter-spalding's *…(Iphigenia)*, and, once again, Douglass's *Narrative*.

Recall that other mythical scream in the Black tradition—the 'heart-rending shrieks' of Frederick Douglass's Aunt Hester, upon her rape and assault by her master, Captain Anthony, which opens the 1845 *Narrative*. Those screams, Douglass recalls, were 'the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was the most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it.'[7] Fred Moten has devoted his life's work to thinking about the deformation of that scream and the formation of Black art:

> The scream's content is not simply unrepresentable but instantiates, rather, an alternative to representation. Such consideration does no such thing as empty the scream of content. It makes no such gesture. Rather, it seeks after what the scream contains (and pours out), and after the way that content is passed on—too terribly and too beautifully—in black art… Black art neither sutures nor is sutured to trauma… There is, rather, a perpetual cutting, a constancy of expansive and enfolding rupture and wound… Aunt Hester's scream is diffused in but not diluted by black music in particular and black art in general. But if this is so it is because her rape, as well as Douglass's various representations of it, is an aesthetic act…the expropriative, radically improper violence that is held in and pours out from song and dance in blackness.[8]

We are habituated, in Black Studies, to seeing history's allegories everywhere: to reading Hester's rape as the inaugural traumatic event that engenders our Blackness, and her scream as a sonic echo reverberating across time. And while we may pay too easy a respect to the distinction between politics and aesthetics, Moten gives us to understand them as sutured in Black art: 'Jazz does not disappear the problem; it *is* the problem, and will not disappear. It is, moreover, the problem's diffusion, which is to say that what it thereby brings into relief is the very *idea* of the problem.'[9] To infuse *…(Iphigenia)* with a sonic Blackness, to freeze Iphigenia between her liberation and being 'back in it', is to diffuse the problem once again. Or, to put the matter somewhat polemically, Black people need the classical tradition to bring our problems into relief.

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[7] Douglass (1986), 51.
[8] Moten (2017), xi.
[9] Moten (2017), xxi.