

IPHIGENIA'S STIGMATOLOGIES

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The title of Wayne Shorter and esperanza spalding's opera—not simply *Iphigenia*, but rather ...(*Iphigenia*)—invites reflection on its programmatic punctuation: Iphigenia dwells between parentheses, supplemented by an ellipsis.

The libretto of the opera is not yet available and will not be for a long time, because for the co-creators this is very much a work in progress, or, in Nate Chinen's words, 'a piece at war with itself',¹ that is, a piece sustained by an ongoing impetus to exceed itself. The titular ellipsis points to improvisation as a creative principle, to unfinishedness as an aesthetic and political (dis)orientation expressed in the opera's unsettling (non-)finale, in which the characters head into an unbound, dark background, a spatialization of the 'open tense' often evoked in the opera, which, as I will suggest, is at once Afrofuturist and Afropessimist. 'There is no element in which language resembles music more than in the punctuation marks', Adorno says.² The absent presence of ellipsis is an inscription of jazz's 'cutting and abundant refusal of closure', in the words of Fred Moten³—a refusal evoked by the opera's proliferation of Iphigenias. The three dots accompanying the character's name on the page correspond to the five Iphigenias who delay the arrival of esperanza-as-Iphigenia, 'my dearest hope', as one of the men calls her, Iphigenia with a deer's horns, Iphigenia in a futuristic spacesuit, Iphigenia in the 'open tense'. Slaughtered bodies one beside the other and beside the deer, which always remains onstage, never dying but always dead, this ensemble of five women and an animal epitomize countless, anonymous victims of gender, race, and species violence whose traumas punctuate the historical flow, make and unmake history like graphic traces that prick the blank page.⁴

The ellipsis as well as the parentheses can be construed as a radical response to the textual multiplicity of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*, which, more than any other tragedy, is a work in progress. Produced posthumously, this play, which Edward Said places among the examples of late style,⁵ attracted many interventions and alterations by actors in its performance and reperformance in antiquity.⁶ The surviving finale, in which Iphigenia disappears unscathed, queerly raised to

1. Chinen (2021).

2. Adorno (1990), 300.

3. Moten (2003), 85. See Best in this issue.

4. See Adorno (1990), 301: 'History has left its residue in punctuation marks, and it is history, far more than meaning or grammatical function, that looks out at us, rigidified and trembling slightly, from every mark of punctuation.'

5. Said (2006), 139.

6. See esp. Gurd (2005), Michelakis (2006), and Haselswerdt (2022).

the aether by her erotically attached protector Artemis and replaced by a deer, is not Euripidean, according to most scholarly accounts.⁷ Like Iphigenia herself, the play has been the target of endless (and arbitrary) interventions, dictated by the normative desire of modern classical philologists to excise this or that allegedly interpolated part of its textual body, to mutilate it in the name of authenticity, or to 'stigmatize', that is, to mark it with a *stigma*—an 'imprint' or the tattooing of a slave's skin. They have strived to separate the Euripidean Iphigenia from her invisible alter egos, from the other, non-Euripidean, 'interpolated', anonymous, post-, anti-, or non-classical Iphigenias who, in the tradition, have been silently fused with her.⁸ The sequence of dots is an imaginative rendering of the tension between this fusion and the (physical, ethical) besideness conjured by the immobile parataxis of bodies onstage. In this perspective, the ellipsis—a space of no-language before or within language—functions as a supplement which disrupts the unified 'I' (an ego) manifested by the first letter of Iphigenia's name through the suspension generated by a preemptive unsaid, a dangling no-longer- or not-yet-said. In the transition from the second to the third act, when we see the body of *esperanza-as-Iphigenia* in a tight crouch, isolated like the slaughtered deer, she is concentrated into a luminous dot, a flashing *punctum*—as though the disrupted yet supplemented 'I' has rematerialized the human and non-human corpse as not just a plurality but a bundle of energy. While the stigmatic 'I'—at once the interpellating marker of subjectivization and the wounding of the slave's skin, a denial of subjectivity—is transformed into the pulsating plurality of points, a *stigmatology*,⁹ the parentheses yield a shelter of precarious inbetweenness. They are not the philological brackets of deletion, 'creating enclaves',¹⁰ signaling exclusion or non-authenticity—of which there are many in the latest edition of Euripides' text¹¹—or the figure of the claustrophobic male homosociality that besieges Iphigenia in the Greek camp. They are a typography of welcoming provisionality, surrounding ongoingness, embracing sororal camaraderie¹²—the ethical shapeshifting reflecting the transformative conation behind the continuous writing of (and against) the libretto.¹³

In the last act, in which we seem to be plunged back into the Euripidean script, Iphigenia's head becomes a *punctum* of rebellion when, after apparently

7. On the queer intimacy between Iphigenia and Artemis, see Haselswerdt (2022) and Rabinowitz and Bullen (2022).

8. See Gurd (2005), 9: 'There is not one *Iphigenia at Aulis*, there are many *Iphigenias at Aulis*.'

9. On 'stigmatology', see Szendy (2018), 60.

10. Adorno (1990), 304.

11. On this *OCT* edition by James Diggle, see Gurd (2005), 67, who points out that the 'new stability' apparently achieved 'is based on a systematization of the subjectivity and incompleteness of text-critical insight, replacing the notion of an original, law-abiding, and law-setting cause (Euripides the author) with a systematic calculus of probabilities'.

12. On sorority, see Butler and Sanyal in this special issue.

13. Chinen (2021): 'I felt [the work] kind of flailing at, and pushing against, the shape that we tried to fit it into in Boston.'

acquiescing in her own sacrifice for the benefit of Greece's 'ugly freedom',¹⁴ she turns her back to (or against) us and stretches a high note into a retching, a vomiting—replacing the blade of the sacrificial knife with a lofty pitch, converting it into the sonic puncture of a prolonged intensity. This emesis is akin to the titular points, for, as Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda have observed, in regard to the dash, 'the puncture in the text is the *ejected* remainder of the process of symbolization'.¹⁵ Again, at the end of the opera, spalding and the other Iphigenias who accompany her, fused with yet distinguished from her, forming the ensemble not only of a chorus but also of a parenthesis, turn their backs to us, becoming a sequence of moving points illuminated by the iridescence of the rainbow formed by their robes, following the maternal usher clad in blue into the unknown (the aether or the sea), the never-filled ellipsis that precedes Iphigenia or the Iphigenias and into which we are urged, disoriented, to follow.

The ellipsis figures the ambivalence of the finale, torn between Afrofuturist and Afropessimist prospects. In Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*—where 'the invisible man's subterranean spaceship, propelled by sonic technologies, carries Ellison's protagonist towards a new identity, a new aesthetic practice, and perhaps, finally, to a truly new future'¹⁶—the frequently occurring ellipsis works, as Jennifer DeVere Brody observes, as 'a figure of absence' which 'is paradoxically more meaning-full, rather than meaning-less'.¹⁷ However, the fact remains that 'the ellipsis is ambivalent, enigmatic, paradoxical—the presence of absence (or vice versa) that like the blackness of blackness both "is and ain't"'.¹⁸ At a certain point in Shorter and spalding's opera, we see *Iph...i...* in the supertitles—a name punctuated, internally voided, by an ellipsis, emptied of onomastic content, of traumatic burden, as though in a preview of the final self-evacuation. That gesture itself is an attempted self-liberation from the oppressive fullness of the name, a name, meaning 'born with strength', that seems to condemn her to self-sacrifice in order to measure up to the toxic masculine psychology of 'courage'. The palinodic vomiting of abject organic dots, immediately cleaned up by an extra, is both cathartic and anti-cathartic.¹⁹ In the uncertain finale of Euripides' play, a sacrifice—whether its victim is Iphigenia or a deer—is the act that makes the army become unstuck, that interrupts the oppression of temporal stillness, and leaves the Greeks free to commit violence in the name of freedom. In Shorter and spalding's opera, the possibility of this 'event'—this marking of a before and an after, of a 'cut' within unbound time

14. I use the phrase, coined by Anker (2022), 9, to refer to the dynamic—modern as well as pre-modern—in which practices of freedom produce harm, brutality, and subjugation *as freedom*'.

15. Comay and Ruda (2018), 80 (my emphasis).

16. Yaszek (2005), 310.

17. Brody (2008), 71.

18. Brody (2008), 73. Berlant (2022), 125, notes that 'the ellipsis can be cast as the dissociative diacritical mark that is rhetorically rendered as a falling apart of meaning and connection' or 'a call to connect the dots differently'.

19. On the tragic anti-catharsis of emesis, see Telò (2020a), 151 and 225f., and (2020b).

that coincides with the cut of the sacrificial knife—is forestalled by the dead deer or, to be more precise, by the deadness of the deer, which diffuses a pervasive sense of undifferentiation throughout the three acts and even beyond the finale. Instead of an interchangeable sacrifice (Iphigenia or the deer) at the service of narrative economy, of a plot resolution, we are confronted with the an-economy of two slaughters that are equally bracketed, undone. Always onstage, never abandoning our sight, the deer is not just the one that, in the myth, will or could be sacrificed in lieu of Iphigenia, but also the one that caused Agamemnon's and the Greeks' predicament in the first place: the animal sacred to Artemis that the king killed in the woods in a moment of hubristic delirium. The ending is on the threshold between an ellipsis ('...Trojan war') and a strikethrough ('Trojan War'). Instead of the Greeks, it will be the Iphigenias who face the sea, as the guidance of the blue-clad usher—an Artemis/Clytemnestra/Thetis figure—suggests. Like emesis—a protest against and undoing of myth's ingurgitating power²⁰—this movement is not forward but backward, for in moving toward uncertainty, toward an ellipsis, the Iphigenias invite us to read the opera's title from right to left, as it were. In this respect, the sororal movement initiated in the finale is not just Afrofuturistic, but also partakes in an Afro-pessimistic, non-futural orientation, epitomized, for Calvin Warren, by a strikethrough.²¹ It resembles a pro-/re-gression toward the traces of oneself, toward one's 'beautiful self-elimination', an image that brings us back to the mass suicide of the Middle Passage, constantly renewed in the lethal journeys of the victims of political displacement and racialized capitalism.²²

To paraphrase the performance's program, what will we make of this moment 'when we are so desperately in need of new visions for the world?'²³ We could say that the answer offered by spalding, who identifies as 'a Black multihyphenated disrupter',²⁴ is the 'open tense', which may be interpreted as a tense openness, that is, the affect of the hyphen (implicitly present in the name Iphi-genia): 'a continually collapsing structure', 'a trope of perpetual tension'.²⁵ This tension, both Afrofuturistic and -pessimistic, is a consequence of Iphigenia's self-evacuation, of her an-archival ejection of melancholic introjection, of the accumulated loss that makes the ego.²⁶

20. On the anti-teleology of emesis, see Brinkema (2011). The power of myth is both *consumptive* and *digestive*, for it both destroys and hierarchically arranges its objects: for the distinction, see Brinkema (2022), 193f.

21. See Warren (2018), 5 and 13: 'Blacks...have function but not Being—the function of black (ness) is to give form to a terrifying formlessness (nothing)... Black ~~being~~ never becomes, or stands forth, but exists in concealment, falling, and inconsistency'.

22. On the concept of 'beautiful self-elimination' in relation to the suicides of the Middle Passage, see Best (2018).

23. Project description on the Octopus Theatricals webpage (n.d.), <http://octopustheatricals.com/iphigenia>.

24. Interviewed in Brooks (2021).

25. Brody (2018), 85.

26. See Butler (1997), 171: 'There can be no ego without melancholia... The ego's loss is constitutive.'

This ego struck through while being relieved of itself models an abolitionist move—the abolition of an ‘*I*’ that lets itself be absorbed by, rather than absorbing, loss. Reading *Iph...i...* as a precursor of this absorption, we could say that the abolished *I* turns a named body into an elliptical non-self or into the supplemented form *Iph-*, ‘if’—the glimpse of a ‘rebirth’ in a subjunctive mode (*If...gen...*).²⁷

27. On self-abolition and Black radicality, see Bey (2022); on subjunctivity as a possibility of Black *poiêsis*, see Quashie (2021), 28f.; following Audre Lorde, Quashie, 66, suggests that ‘*experience is subjunctive* because it merges what is deeply felt with what has not yet occurred’.