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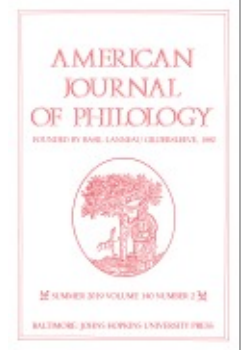
## The Classics, Race, and Community-Engaged or Public Scholarship

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## GUEST EDITORIAL



### THE CLASSICS, RACE, AND COMMUNITY-ENGAGED OR PUBLIC SCHOLARSHIP

PATRICE D. RANKINE

America begins in black plunder and white democracy,  
two features that are not contradictory but complementary.

—Coates 2017, 180

Our discipline has always been, at its core, concerned with language. At its best, *The American Journal of Philology* has professed to being a forum for those seeking knowledge of the words and worlds of Greece and Rome. It is unreasonable, however, to disentangle the discipline of philology and its allied fields—art history, philosophy, archaeology, and so forth—from the modern realities of slavery, race, and their impacts well after global abolition, emancipation, and any declaration of a post-racial period. That is, we bring a great deal of cultural baggage to what we call the Classics.

If we can acknowledge and act on this reality, then the picture that I imagine for Classics is not bleak. Hope abounds, though it continues to dwell not in the center, but in border towns, as it were. Playwright Luis Alfaro's opening session of the 2019 SCS meeting last January in San Diego attested both to promise and to marginalization. On the one hand, my optimism for the Classics bordered on exuberance when I attended his lecture, the opening session. As one of the co-editors of *The Oxford Handbook of Greek Drama in the Americas*, along with Justine McConnell, Fiona Macintosh, and the late Kate Bosher. I have known Alfaro's work for years.<sup>1</sup> I had the opportunity to see his *Oedipus el Rey* in 2012, in Chicago's Victory Gardens Theater. In his SCS presentation, here was Alfaro arguing what classical reception theorists have been saying for years: that the classical "beats" (as he put it) of a given text, play, or experience harmonize in unexpected ways with the rhythms of modern

<sup>1</sup> Bosher, McConnell, Macintosh, and Rankine 2015.

life and knowledge. Recognizing these beats brings understanding, on so many levels. In the first place, it helps us to realize what guides our perceptions. Alfaro's adaptations do not solely ask us to transport ourselves to the theater of Dionysus in the 5th century B.C.E., although there is value to reconstructing, from the text, what we ascertain would have been aspects of the language, staging, costume, gestures, and reactions of the moment. Oliver Taplin and others have guided us well through reconstructions of ancient drama.<sup>2</sup> More than this, however, Alfaro's *Oedipus el Rey* and his other adaptations help us to realize what guides our perceptions of the text and its meanings in the first place. Alfaro's adaptations encourage us in the direction of a deeper understanding of our contemporary world and what drives us toward particular texts and interpretations. This process unveils truth, so that we may know where we are and who we are, before we seek to understand the world around us and its past. Approaching texts from a deeper understanding of our investments—emotional, cultural, and ideological—breaks down the gates of the stronghold of the Classics, the cultural, ideological, and emotional power the field has held. It helps bring us to a richer understanding.

Thus, Alfaro's participation in our meeting gave me hope, on that first evening. His perspectives expand our understanding of familiar plays, some of the most canonical texts in world literature. His perspectives contribute to our understanding, help us to feel the beats that he feels, all of which we discover, with him, *through interaction with and interpretation of the texts of the ancient plays themselves*.

The significance of Alfaro's presence at this meeting, the opening of the 150th anniversary of the SCS, was drowned out, however, by the sights and sounds of a miasma. The pollution, in this case, is entitlement, and race-baiting. By the time of the Saturday panel on "The Future of Classics" and the attendant extracurricular scuffling about who belongs and who does not, Alfaro's presentation was long forgotten.<sup>3</sup> A different panel, for which I served as respondent, was examining at the same time Margaret Malamud's *African Americans and the Classics*.<sup>4</sup> Our panel was better attended than many similar ones have been in the past, but it still did not play a central role in the field's self-examination on this major anniversary. On our panel, Shelley Haley continued to make calls for

<sup>2</sup>Taplin 2002.

<sup>3</sup>The events were covered by *Inside Higher Ed* (Flaherty 2019a, 2019b) and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Pettit 2019a, 2019b).

<sup>4</sup>Malamud 2016.

broadier inclusion in her critique of Malamud's work, which does little to center black female authors of the 19th century like Anna Julia Cooper or Pauline Hopkins. Instead, she argued, Malamud highlights white male classicists as part of an apparent even-handedness in her discussions of slavery and race. These included men like Thomas Dew, who served as President of The College of William & Mary from 1836–1846, and Basil Lanneau Gildersleeve, Professor of Greek at the University of Virginia from 1856 to 1876 and then at Johns Hopkins University from 1876 to 1904. Both men were apologists for the institution of slavery and for the intellectual and moral superiority of white people, Dew before the Civil War and Gildersleeve mainly after it. When even-handedness means remembering such men *instead of* women like Cooper and Hopkins, we are not only far from doing what we can to dismantle the edifice of white supremacy in our society and in our discipline, but we are blind to it; and until we confront this blindness with an Oedipal zeal, we will understand very little of the truth.

As shocking, unsettling, and flawed as the *Black Athena* controversy of the 1990s was to many within the discipline, in seeking to unearth and expose the racial realities that underpin our field, a day of reckoning was a long time coming.<sup>5</sup> The facts, however, are not in dispute, and they implicate the founders, both of our country and of our discipline in this country, in a discourse of white supremacy. Regarding the former, readers of this journal may well know that Thomas Jefferson regarded Classics, especially in its relationship to language, as among most sacred and human of pursuits. The reader should also be aware, however, that Jefferson wrote in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* that he could not “find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration.” Specifically, he made this remark in dismissing the classicizing poetry of Phillis Wheatley. As he put it, “religion indeed produced a Phyllis Whately [sic], but it could not produce a poet.”<sup>6</sup> Regarding our discipline, readers will certainly know that this journal, *The American Journal of Philology*, was founded by Gildersleeve. Indeed, it would be difficult to avoid this knowledge, since the journal continues to commemorate its founder on the front cover of every issue. It also honors him every year when it bestows the Gildersleeve Award on an article judged by an independent committee to be the best of those that appeared in its most recent volume. These

<sup>5</sup>See Berlinerblau 1999.

<sup>6</sup>Jefferson 2018 (1781–5), 147, cf. the editor's note: “TJ's misspelling of Wheatley's name suggests that he was not particularly familiar with her work, although her volume was in the library he sold to the nation in 1815” (319 n. 176).

honors are directed at Gildersleeve as a classicist, but he was also, like Jefferson, what the narrator of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* calls "a teller of polite Negro stories" (like Mr. Norton), tales of the African's ability to imitate, but not intelligently construct, Greek or any other learning.<sup>7</sup>

It is understandable that many would prefer not to know such things, especially if one calls them what they are; for they are, in fact, parts of a white supremacist narrative. I do not use these words lightly. I want to normalize them, because white supremacy has, in fact, been the norm. As it pertains to social customs and practices, white supremacy permeates the modern environment, in America and beyond its borders. In the United States, this white supremacy is not that of the hooded Klansman in his long robe. Rather, it is a part of everyday behavior, part of our shared norms and values. It is not even the exclusive property of any one race. As was attested in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the 1954 trial that ended legal segregation in America's schools, little black girls, when given a choice, preferred to play with white dolls instead of those of their own sable complexion.<sup>8</sup> The views of Jefferson, Dew, Gildersleeve, and many, many others are so ingrained in American life and thought that it will take herculean efforts, likely for many years to come, to undo them. This is the case even, or especially, when the hand of white supremacy is invisible.

Certainly, the constructs that led to this moment were built, in no small part, upon the edifice of the Classics. Thomas Dew told his slaveholding students that they should be "undivided and undismayed—firm and resolute as the Spartan band at Thermopylae."<sup>9</sup> Regarding slavery, Dew takes an Aristotelian position that it is natural, a lesser plight than the death that might come in war. Therefore, it is evidence that one group is superior to the other, in accordance with its longstanding dominance: "Slavery is a step on the way to civilization and is important as a piece of progress," one scholar writes of Dew's view; "Slaves were unfit for freedom, economically and morally."<sup>10</sup> In America, slaves have been, overwhelmingly, African, and as such there is among whites a natural "antipathy to an intermixture of two colors."<sup>11</sup> Gildersleeve, equally classicizing in his white supremacy, "proudly fought on the side of the Confederacy, and viewed what he and other Southerners called the 'War Between the States' through the lens of the Peloponnesian War."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Ellison 1994 (1952), 37; cf. Malamud 2016, 16.

<sup>8</sup> Bergner 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Thelin 2014, 64.

<sup>10</sup> Brophy 2008, 1121.

<sup>11</sup> Dew 1852, 406.

<sup>12</sup> Malamud 2016, 142.

Gildersleeve, one might argue, like Dew or even the great Jefferson, was merely a man of his times. As such, he may have been a poor social critic, but he was still a great philologist. But this will not do. By upholding Gildersleeve as a hero, we Classicists, even those of us who recognize the distastefulness of his views, dismiss the correlation between white supremacy and the idea of *pure* philology. As Mr. Emerson asserts in *Invisible Man*, there is no purity in the world: “All of our motives are impure.”<sup>13</sup> Everything we touch mixes with something else, and thus the pretense of a pure philology, set apart from its legacies and associations, is pernicious. The correlation between racial slavery, Gildersleeve’s white supremacist views, his founding of *AJP*, and, later, segregation in the United States, is worth much closer attention than it was afforded at the recent SCS annual meeting, which was itself fraught with racist sentiment and behavior, alongside the veneer of untainted academic reflection. White supremacy, after all, is not pure. It is, as I have already said, not only the cold, hard fact of hoods and robes. It is mixed up with everything else in modern life and letters. If we accept this premise, then it is no surprise that white supremacy showed up at the SCS meeting not in the form of hooded America, but rather in an unanticipated aside. More on this momentarily; first, a few more illustrations of how innocuous the admixture of white supremacy, *as invisible*, might seem to be. These illustrations should serve to expose some of the longstanding constructs that come to be embodied in seemingly innocent people, who mean no harm and are, understandably, offended when they are confronted with arguments that no one is pure, and everyone is implicated in this pernicious discourse.

Once it is clear that motives—those causes that instigate individual action—are impure, the uneasy connection between race and the Classics is exposed as iron-clad, rather than incidental. These connections show up in the most seemingly innocuous places, mixed in with innocence. An example: Denise McCoskey has studied Latin language instruction and the subject of slavery in 19th-century grammar books. In an unpublished paper, she works to “determine the kinds of ‘classical values’ students were absorbing not by reading, say, Tacitus or Vergil, but by learning noun declensions and completing practice exercises.”<sup>14</sup> This may not seem like an ideologically loaded exercise; and yet the seemingly innocuous use of the English “servant” for *servus* in the American context belies real efforts at erasure, the rubbing out of the enslavement of Africans that began in

<sup>13</sup> Ellison 1994 (1952), 186.

<sup>14</sup> McCoskey 2010. I am grateful to Professor McCoskey for sharing her essay draft with me.

Virginia in 1619. This enslavement and its erasure, by representing the abject status of the “slave” with the far less degraded status of the “servant,” impacts the subsequent status of blacks in America as second-class citizens, “separate but equal” after their emancipation in 1863, which was proclaimed only halfway through a civil war that lasted from 1861 to 1865. This erasure extends to the legal apparatus of segregation after *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, owing to the failure of Southern reconstruction and to the Compromise of 1877, when federal troops withdrew from a host of Southern states. Peonage extended into the late 20th century and still extends into the 21st.<sup>15</sup> Ostensibly innocent, the rendering of *servus* as “servant” obfuscates the relationship between the Roman world that an American student enters through the Latin grammar book and her own contemporary prism. When this is compounded with the minimal discussion of civics and American history that prevails throughout so many of our school systems, the student who learns to translate *servus* as “servant” gazes upon a whitewashed edifice that once was history, an edifice that once housed those dark, African bodies that are now invisible to the reader. Equally pernicious, the student does not even learn about the cruelty that was Roman slavery, cruelty now excused by notions of historical relativism and revisionism because “slaves” or “servants,” after all, must deserve and desire their status. As McCoskey puts it, “there is little attempt to criticize or contest the underlying and amoral ‘logic’ that allows one individual to own another.”

In this America of 2019, when we unveil the fragile human being hidden under the hood, she is our neighbor, our governor, our president. In the Virginia of Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Dew, and Basil Gildersleeve, not in 1785 but in 2019—the Virginia where I live and work—Governor Ralph Northam cannot escape the hidden secrets of his past and of our country.<sup>16</sup> Featured on his Eastern Virginia Medical School yearbook page, for all to see, is that hooded menace alongside that figure’s photo negative, its body double, in blackface. Even if Northam himself, as he insists, is not one of the people depicted on that yearbook page, he has thrived in a context where racial sentiment, mockery, and the dehumanization of non-whites are the norms. *This* is white supremacy. In the epoch of Northam’s Virginia in the 1980s, not only that of Jefferson in 1781, this

<sup>15</sup> See Coates 2017, which makes a case study of post-emancipation American life.

<sup>16</sup> The story of Ralph Northam broke in Richmond, Virginia on February 1, 2019 and can be traced in many publications, including the *Richmond Times Dispatch*, *The Washington Post*, and the *New York Times*.

behavior was acceptable enough to constitute a custom, a tradition so strong that Northam can remember donning blackface to impersonate Michael Jackson. The irony of it! The denigration of the experience of Africans in the United States, through blackface minstrelsy, goes back to the 1830s and is always concomitant not only with American humor, but also with harm to actual black people. And yet, owing to impurity, one might indeed claim that there are bad people “on both sides.” America is an impure country where even a privileged, elite black actor can fall from grace by faking a white supremacist attack on his person, citing his race and sexual orientation as the instigations. Identity politics is itself an impure activity.

To return to the theme of hope, and notwithstanding the challenges all around, Classics has the opportunity to confront the quotidian white supremacy that fills our environment in the cultural moment in which we find ourselves. The *American Journal of Philology*, along with other top-tier Classics journals, are in a position to shape what the field could be. The first step is to embody different experiences, those that testify to the deeper truths beneath the surface. Part of how to effect this change has to do with attending to the embodied experiences of contemporary practitioners of the Classics, going beyond sanitized, institutional statements on diversity, harassment, and the like. Dan-el Padilla Peralta put this in stark terms when he claimed that he should have his job in the Classics *because* he is black:

because my Afro-Latinity is the rock-solid foundation upon which the edifice of what I have accomplished and everything I hope to accomplish rests; because my black body’s vulnerability challenges and chastizes the universalizing pretensions of color-blind classics; because my black being-in-the-world makes it possible for me to ask new and different questions within the field, to inhabit new and different approaches to answering them, and to forge alliances with other scholars past and present whose black being-in-the-world has cleared the way for my leap into the breach.<sup>17</sup>

To riff on Padilla Peralta’s statement about himself, let me recall my earlier remarks about Luis Alfaro’s presence at the SCS: his participation was meaningful *because* he is a Chicano playwright, and his Chicano identity is “the rock-solid foundation upon which the edifice” of all he does has been built. Padilla Peralta’s remark about “universalizing pretensions”

<sup>17</sup> Padilla Peralta 2019a.



echoes what I have been referring to here as whitewashing. Padilla Peralta's "*because*" I am black embodies experiences. In this context, blackness amounts to much more than the pigment of a superficial diversity, a deeper, more exercised reaction to the idea that "you may have got your job because you're black."<sup>18</sup> The idea of "color-blind classics" was always a fantasy.

Privileging embodied experiences in the way that Padilla Peralta describes it—the "new and different questions . . . new and different approaches"—would require a conscious commitment to actively disassembling an edifice that it has taken many centuries to construct. We would have to give the lie to seemingly neutral notions of excellence, just as we unveil the true motives of "servant" for *servus*. The other side of "because you're black" is an apparent meritocracy: "I would prefer to think you got your job because of merit."<sup>19</sup> The notion of merit and its ostensibly objective measures—contemporary assessments of aptitude and achievement replacing craniology and Jim Crow tests—are rightly under challenge. Classics, and especially philology as its essence, pretends to be a neutral and disinvested test of intelligence. Whether or not John Calhoun asserted that a black person was incapable of learning Greek, philology as an "index" of human excellence has been a constant in American life and letters.<sup>20</sup> Along with the pretense of neutrality as it pertains to merit, philology professes to retreat from all contemporary inquiry, fixing its gaze on the past. Slavery and its aftermath, xenophobia in all of its contemporary forms, from sexism to border walls, are someone else's concern.

This was never a genuine or sustainable posture. The embodied experiences of its practitioners have always colored the field of Classics. The reader does not have to reach back to the Europe of Martin Bernal to corroborate this truth. From the 1970s to 1990s, and even into the present, sexuality studies dominate the seemingly objective prism through which the Classics were studied. Certainly, the idea of philology as a neutral, objective discipline took many iterations to build. Similarly, dismantling the constructs will take sustained and conscious effort. If a move as seemingly innocent as "servant" for *servus* belies the neutrality that it seems to present, imagine how cloudy is the view of modern concerns that quicken the study of the past in the first place. Our Oedipal blindness is total.

<sup>18</sup>A video of the panel (Society of Classical Studies 2019 in the bibliography) is available on line; the comment in question is made at 49:00.

<sup>19</sup>See previous note.

<sup>20</sup>Calhoun: see Ronnick 2004; index: see Bernard 2017.

In this blindness, we may not know who we are or where we stand, but we should be truth-seekers. The first move that we can make toward truth would be to abandon the pretense of pure philology that has been so fundamental to the field. I do *not* say to abandon the pursuit of language proficiency. What I mean is that a pure philology, unmixed with contemporary realities, is and always has been a pretense, and a pernicious lie. Philology is not a practice that confers proof of merit. Pretending to such purity entails an erasure. The *American Journal of Philology* and other journals like it, recognizing this, should publish more articles that dig into the social and cultural lenses that influence our discipline.

Classical reception studies, often discussed among classicists as a corruption of pure philology, especially when it comes to quantifying merit in terms of peer-reviewed articles and the affirmation of our colleagues for tenure and promotion, is already at the forefront of addressing how we view the Classics. A subfield that has penetrated past the guardians at the gate, the posture of reception studies is that, by examining ourselves first, we come to deeper understanding of the perspectives and biases that we bring to our study of the past.<sup>21</sup> In addition to this, by prioritizing the present, we also gain a much-needed counterpoint that in fact improves our knowledge of the past. While it is an open secret that reception studies is viewed by some classicists as a contaminating influence—as “not philological”—it has in fact been a balm to many of us on the periphery of the citadel.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup>I am aware that this is a definition of reception studies with which some may disagree. Over twenty-five years ago, Martindale (1993) offered what proved to be an influential thesis advocating attention to the historical reception of Latin poetry in particular, but with clear implications for Classics as a whole. Martindale offers what he calls “weak” and “strong” versions of this thesis, the weak version being that earlier sites of reception, particularly those that involve the interventions of poets, offer us the reactions of particularly gifted readers, which may be of use to us in our own efforts to come to terms with classical texts; the strong version is that, in fact, it is not even possible to recover (for example) a pre-Dantean concept of (say) Vergil. The weak thesis has been widely exploited, to mainly beneficial effect, while the strong one has not really received the scrutiny that such a statement deserves. Here I can only note that to privilege so categorically the reading of even as brilliant a reader as Dante over those of ourselves and our contemporaries does not do justice to the sheer diversity of subject positions that reception studies has so successfully opened up for discussion, although it does expose how posterity has tended to receive its pasts.

<sup>22</sup>It would take recounting and presenting many anonymous cases of junior colleagues being told that their work will not be valued to make this case. The fault here is obviously not entirely with Classics but with the academy more broadly, which its members reify and reinforce through what we accept and reject as relevant to our fields and to the advancement of knowledge.

In the structure of our field, the relationship between philology, marginalized people, and classical reception studies is not accidental: it is a consequence of years of exclusion. It is a pity that we have not yet fully realized that reception can uncover the perspectives of a much broader range of practitioners. The January 2019 volume of the *Classical Receptions Journal* boasts titles like “Tragic hero and hero tragedy: reimagining *Oedipus the King* as *Jingju* (Peking opera) for the Chinese stage,” and “Redeeming Jocasta: Tawfiq al-Hakim’s ‘Eastern,’ ‘Arab’ reception of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*.”<sup>23</sup> Each article not only gives the reader entry into Chinese and Arab drama, respectively, but Shouhua Qi, Wei Zhang, and Karen L. Carducci also add depth to our readings of *Oedipus the King*. It is no accident that Sasha-Mae Eccleston, the Brown University classicist who also happens to be black, is published in this same volume.<sup>24</sup> The fact that Padilla Peralta offered a statistical analysis regarding how infrequently underrepresented groups are published in journals like *AJP* now marshals data to document what many of us have been facing.

My experiences in Classics echo those of Eccleston and Padilla Peralta. As a young scholar, my attempts at pure philology were systematically shunned by traditional Classics journals, including more progressive venues like *Arion*, often with little or no feedback. I received tenure in 2004, before the advent of reception studies journals. It was in 2009, in the inaugural issue of one such journal, *Classical Receptions*, that Emily Greenwood featured a discussion of my first book, *Ulysses in Black: Ralph Ellison, Classicism, and African American Literature*, in her review article, “Re-rooting the Classical Tradition.”<sup>25</sup> Feeling shut out of the stronghold of Classics, I and many scholars I know continue to dwell on the margins of the field—one might even say, in the ghettos—much as we congregate in obscure corners at national conferences, a parallel to the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria.<sup>26</sup> Only recently has the field begun to make more positive gestures toward redress. Meanwhile, I and many others spend our time in pursuit of a more meaningful truth. We publish academic books that also foster conversations with our families and communities. Although my mother still has not penetrated the depths of Ralph Ellison’s abyss, *Invisible Man*, she has enjoyed Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and, through it, has come to understand some of the

<sup>23</sup> Qi and Zhang 2019, Carducci 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Eccleston 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Rankine 2006, Greenwood 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Tatum 2017.

puzzle pieces that comprise the body of work I am producing. Reading Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* through Homer's *Odyssey*, I was able to offer something to a community that welcomed me.<sup>27</sup> Many classicists, particularly those interested in reception studies, listened too. Edith Hall is one who reached out to me in 2007, a time when I actually thought that her invitation to speak at a conference commemorating the abolition of the slave trade was a hoax. From such work, classicists have gained perspectives on Homer that they had not fully imagined, such as the seriousness of Odysseus' susceptibility as a potential slave.<sup>28</sup>

My work is in the sphere of community engaged or public scholarship because my primary audience, to paraphrase Toni Morrison, was *myself*, and by extension my communities, and much of that has nothing to do with the Classics. As such, like many of us, I have charted my course within the academy with little help from, or thanks to, the "top-tier, peer-reviewed" journals. This is true of many scholars and intellectuals who embody difference. Owing to a broad and innocent dismissal of the questions that we ask and the interests that we pursue, we move to spaces where others appreciate our work. Such is the story of many publicly engaged scholars.

Notwithstanding my attempts to characterize my own work as a Professor of Classics, purists will ask what any of this has to do with philology; and it might simply be that there are some for whom the path toward which I am trying to guide our field just will not do. They are just not feeling it. For others, however, who might be close to being convinced, or at least willing to be convinced that articles like Sasha-Mae Eccleston's 2019 piece on Cyrus Console's *The Odicy* (a reworking of Homer's *Odyssey*) belong in *AJP*, or who at least accept that a journal like *Classical Reception* is *fully* the work of real classicists, I close with one last illustration of what I consider to be the Classics at its best.

Vinnie Gonzalez's *Oedipus: A Gospel Myth*, which the Firehouse Theatre in Richmond, Virginia, staged in February 2019, points us right back to philology, as it journeys through the black church experience in America in the early 20th century. The play takes its central cues from Lee Breuer's *Gospel at Colonus*. In fact, in a conversation, Gonzalez told me that he was deeply inspired by Breuer and has reached out to the playwright for dialogue. Framed by a black preacher as narrator, *Oedipus: A Gospel Myth* is steeped in the vernacular of gospel music

<sup>27</sup> Rankine 2006, 80–2, 103–18.

<sup>28</sup> Rankine 2011.

and the truth-seeking of religious experience. As one might imagine, the experience is visceral. The enactment is felt in the living bodies that inhabit the theater; it takes place at the height of performative experience. For those who interpret catharsis in emotional and physical terms, the adaptation is successful, one of the best Oedipuses I have seen. More importantly for our purpose here, the performance opens up aspects of the text worth pursuing in any classroom where a classicist is teaching Greek or ancient texts in translation.

There are many basic passageways to and from the past and present. First, the festival of Dionysus was a religious experience. It was a spiritual journey during a period when it was impossible to separate the civic from the sacred. In what we may call mainstream professional theater in the modern period, this connection is much less strong; often, it is not really in evidence, at all. Many African American communities, however, in the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, also merge the civic and the sacred in public practices. As an example familiar to everyone, the black church in America produced a Martin Luther King, Jr., a social activist working to achieve specific outcomes in secular society, and one who is as adept at inserting Socrates into reflections on civil disobedience as he is citing the Jewish prophet Isaiah and the gospel singer Mahalia Jackson. Gonzalez' preacher, the narrator of *Oedipus*, parallels King and other prominent black preachers. The gospel choir, moreover, raises powerful questions about what a chorus is. Listening to this chorus while reading Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* would be a strong basis for a seminar that I would love to teach, and would even pay money to attend.

In my view, Gonzalez' success in accessing the embodied experience of ancient actors and audiences through modern theatrical practice, and in reuniting civic and sacred concerns through the history of African American spiritual practice and social activism, was possible because the philological register in his production is also rich. In the same conversation I mentioned above, Gonzalez told me that he chose to work with Stephen Berg and Diskin Clay's translation of Sophocles' *OT* for its performativity.<sup>29</sup> Readers of *AJP* will recognize these classicists and their reputations in the field. (Some will even recall that Clay was twice a successor of Gildersleeve, both as Professor of Greek at Hopkins and as editor of *AJP*.) Gonzalez' modern staging of the play, reliant upon this philologically close, but eminently performable translation, illuminates aspects of the ancient text and its world that are too easily glossed over.

<sup>29</sup> Berg and Clay 1978.

At the same time, the performance is a lesson in the limits of translatability, a case study in the types of perspective that modern viewers bring to the text, even with the most literal translation.

Gonzalez' approach is similar to Alfaro's: he told me that he was intent upon involving black communities in Richmond, VA, in his production. In Alfaro's SCS lecture, the playwright recounted his production process, wherein he transforms individuals who have formerly been incarcerated into actors, interpreters of lived experience, ancient and modern. Chicana seers who bring their cultural experiences to bear on their understanding of Medea are as critical as the text and language of Alfaro's adaptation of Euripides' play, his *Electricidad*. In a similar fashion, Gonzalez digs into the vernacular of the black church. The audience that came to the performance I attended was as diverse as was the hybrid staging, an amalgamation of classical experience and philology with contemporary insights that add perspective alongside embodied diversity.

If America begins with the plunder of one group and the liberty of another, in a state of impurity, then a deliberate and perspicuous mixing of practices, forms, and interests can bring about a broader liberation. Names like Alfaro and Gonzalez, Eccelston and Greenwood have the power to heal the wounds inflicted by names like Jefferson and Gildersleeve, until their effects are gone, but not forgotten. All naming involves distinction and identification, and a *philological* journal for Classics cannot be asked to consider all manner of history and culture, American or otherwise. *AJP* can, however, own the impurity, and the pretense of innocence in the form of white supremacy, of its past. Readers can take a dose of truth that renders us neither weak and fragile nor immune, but rather ready to confront our future boldly and intrepidly.

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