

## BLACK, GENDERQUEER, HUMANIMAL IPHIGENIA

*Salar Mameni*

Iphigenia is not one. She is multiple. Central to Wayne Shorter and esperanza spalding's opera titled ...(*Iphigenia*) is the layered multiplicity of Iphigenias who are sacrificed/martyred, time and again, for the cause of Grecian nation building. Unlike other stage and filmic renditions of the opera that tell Iphigenia's story once, emphasizing the psychic drama of what it means to give one's blood for the ideological cause of nation building, ...(*Iphigenia*) repeats the story piling up bodies on stage. Dressed in pink, red, white, silver, fur and more (Fig. 4), Iphigenia's body becomes multiple, becomes collective, becomes sisterhood, becomes interspecies.

Above all, ...(*Iphigenia*) shifts the biotic site of the political from blood to vomit. Martyrdom and sacrifice claim blood as the biological medium through which nations are built. Shorter and spalding's new opera interrupts the symbolic purchase of blood, throwing vomit as a critique of the longstanding heteropatriarchal, white supremacist ordering of nations.

The tension between martyrdom and sacrifice has historically been central to Iphigenia's story. Euripides' original play had a missing (and hence an open) ending that left later adaptations to speculate about Iphigenia's fate. Was her throat cut open as she laid her head down on the altar? Or was her body snatched, last minute, and substituted with a deer, whose blood ran instead into the heart of the Grecian national cause? The distinction between martyrdom and sacrifice hinges upon the question of political agency. Did Iphigenia (or the deer) actively



Figure 4. Still from ...(*Iphigenia*). © Jon Fine.

will their sanguineous incorporation into the nation (i.e., martyrdom) or did their blood run cold upon the altar (i.e., sacrifice)?

This tension between sacrifice and martyrdom is not resolved in Shorter and Spalding's ...(*Iphigenia*). Instead, multiple narratives remain possible as the stage becomes heavy with dead bodies of women and deer alike. From this heap of violence rises Iphigenia of the Open Tense (performed by Spalding), who is not simply the latest and most contemporary version of Iphigenia, but a palimpsest of all who fell dead before her. This complex embodiment is suggested through the horns worn on her crown turning her body into a transpecies, transgendered human/stag. Iphigenia of the Open Tense is not one. She is the incorporation of multiple Iphigenias across the open tense of history.

Let us pause on Iphigenia of the Open Tense—on her convulsive, rhythmic body that vomits (not once but at least twice) on stage.

Historically Iphigenia expressed her wish for martyrdom in many of the adaptations of the Euripidean play. In Charles Elgutter's version (on which Shorter and Spalding partially drew for their libretto), Iphigenia speaks her will to die for Greece as follows:

Weep not, dear mother, nor thou best of fathers  
Nor you Achilles, I would call my lord.  
I am not like other women, wife and mother  
To live serene with handmaidens in thy house,  
To spin, to card the soft white wool, to press  
A curly head upon this breast.  
But consecrated for a nation's work.

(Elgutter, Fourth Act)<sup>1</sup>

With this declaration, Iphigenia expresses her will for martyrdom. Convinced by her words, Ulysses exclaims, 'Daughter inspired, I wed thee unto Greece!'<sup>2</sup> The stage directions that end Elgutter's version of the story leave us with an image of the martyred Iphigenia. It reads: 'Iphigenia, her face illuminated with a martyr's joy, turns her eyes from Ulysses toward the altar, now disclosed, lighted with the sacrificial flame and surrounded by white robed priests.'<sup>3</sup> Martyrdom, in this version, implies a form of political agency. It is Iphigenia who expresses her distinct national role. She dispels the idea that she is to be a domestic wife to Achilles, but offers her body to consecrate the nation. Her blood, here, is given at will for the national cause.

When Iphigenia's body is substituted for a deer before the dagger hits her throat—as we see, first and foremost, in the 'alternative' finale of Euripides' play—it is a deer who sheds blood for the nation as Iphigenia disappears from

---

1. Elgutter (1902), 99.

2. Elgutter (1902), 100.

3. Elgutter (1902), 100.

the altar. This substitution is premised upon the understanding that preclassical Greek societies practiced animal (rather than human) sacrifice, 'including as part of the opening rituals for the theatrical festivals in which Euripides' play would have been presented'.<sup>4</sup> Sacrifice, within this historical context, is based on a hierarchical imposition of the animal below the human. Someone must be sacrificed for the nation. That someone is dependent on social hierarchies. Will it be the daughter of Agamemnon? Will it be a deer?

Iphigenia of the Open Tense disrupts the gendered, racialized species hierarchy that structures the martyrdom/sacrifice logic. Wearing a set of horns on her crown, she is a composite humanimal figure who disallows the human/animal separation. Deer cannot be substituted for the daughter if they are one and the same. Neither is her gender stable as a 'daughter' with her stag's horns. Indeed, as Ella Haselswerdt has suggested, the deer that replaces Iphigenia at the altar has always been a genderqueer 'horned doe'.<sup>5</sup> As Iphigenia expresses herself, 'I am not like other women, wife and mother'.

This genderqueer, humanimal figure is also not white. Played by a black performer (spalding) Iphigenia of the Open Tense brings attention to racial histories of speciation and nationhood. 'The categories of "race" and "species" have co-evolved and are actually *mutually reinforcing* terms', writes Zakiyyah Iman Jackson.<sup>6</sup> Iphigenia of the Open Tense brings to the fore the black female labor of producing the image of the human as belonging to white men. This racial history is dramatized on stage as columns of white men raise their daggers, time and again, across Iphigenia's throat, whose blood consecrates their altars and nations.

The production of the opera as jazz by Shorter and spalding is a commentary on the expectation that classical Greek history be seamlessly transported into hegemonic whiteness. Whiteness is an arbitrary (yet often exclusive) inheritor of Greek history. Greece has been smuggled into whiteness as history has become racialized.<sup>7</sup> The black embodiment of Iphigenia of the Open Tense disrupts the demand that history be white. The 'open tense' of Shorter and spalding's ...(*Iphigenia*) is an open and expansive historical time outside of the narrow instrumentalization of history into the whiteness of racial capital and settler colonial nationhood.

So, not only is Iphigenia in this play black, genderqueer and humanimal, she also cannot be signified through her blood. Blood has long been the signifier of heteropatriarchal nation building within the martyrdom/sacrifice discourse. Blood is what matters nations into being. Yet not all bodies can shed sacred blood. Not all deaths through violent killings are held to be legitimate for patriarchal consecration. Not all deaths are recognized as sacrificial offerings.

---

4. Wolfe (2020), 24.

5. Haselswerdt (2022), 53.

6. Jackson (2020), 12.

7. See for example McCoskey (2018) and Padilla Peralta (2021).

Bodies that fall outside a consecrating function, as Giorgio Agamben has elaborated in the context of Roman law, are known as ‘bare life’: ‘a life that may be killed but not sacrificed.’<sup>8</sup> Alexander Weheliye has drawn attention to racial histories of ‘bare life’, lives that are lost to racial slavery and the plantation system. These are sites of brutal violence where killing and dying happens without sacrificial glory and outside the law. ‘Though murdering slaves was punishable by law in many US states’, Weheliye writes, ‘usually these edicts were not enforced, and the master could kill slaves with impunity since they were categorized as property’.<sup>9</sup> While plantation slavery held up settler colonial nation building across the globe, it instrumentalized bodies who could be killed without being sacrificed. The blood of the sacrificed is sacred. It is the biomatter that feeds altars and nations. Despite the difference I have drawn between martyrdom and sacrifice, both rely upon blood for the consecration of the nation. Black genderqueer bodies have historically exceeded the order of the sacred. They have been those who could be killed but not sacrificed.

The fluid that spills upon the stage in Shorter and Spalding’s ...(*Iphigenia*) is not blood but vomit. The opera ends with Iphigenia turning her back to the audience, folding her body in half and retching on stage. While the ending of the opera has historically contended with whose blood was spilled (Iphigenia’s or a deer’s?), this opera throws up in the face of this choice. The ending remains open but the logic of blood for patriarchal nationhood is foreclosed.

The vomit on stage is the excess fluid that remains after sacrificial bodies have been channeled into nationalist projects. The ‘indigestion’ of Iphigenia of the Open Tense, as one reviewer of the opera has put it, ‘is revolutionary’.<sup>10</sup> ‘Iphigenia throwing up on stage’, the reviewer writes, ‘signals that she is no longer a part of this digestive tract of her own myth that is hellbent on consuming her.’<sup>11</sup> Here, the act of retching is a refusal to be eaten. It is a refusal to shed blood, to be the vital organ gobbled up into metabolic nationalism.

Indigestion is indeed revolutionary since bodies that cannot be consumed and digested into nationalist projects become the excess stuck in the throats of settler colonial nations. This excess is what Weheliye equates with the site of possibility. ‘Violent political domination activates a fleshy surplus’, he writes.<sup>12</sup> ‘The flesh, rather than displacing bare life or civil death, excavates the social (after)life of these categories: it represents racializing assemblages of subjection that can never annihilate the lines of flight, freedom dreams, practices of liberation, and possibilities of other worlds’.<sup>13</sup> Iphigenia of the Open Tense represents such practices of liberation. She is the possibility of other worlds built upon the wreckage

---

8. Agamben (1998), 101.

9. Weheliye (2014), 37.

10. Stovall (2021).

11. Stovall (2021).

12. Weheliye (2014), 2.

13. Weheliye (2014), 2.

of racial history. She represents freedom dreams that leave behind white patriarchal nation building. Shorter and Spalding's opera present us with an opening rather than an ending.

Here I end with the words the Usher says to the white Grecians on stage, standing with their raised daggers at Iphigenia's throat: 'This play is not about you!'