

WAYWARD VOICES: CHORUS, IMPROVISATION AND UPHEAVAL IN ...(*IPHIGENIA*)

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The chorus propels transformation. It is an incubator of possibility.
An assembly sustaining dreams of the otherwise.

S. Hartman (2019), *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 347f.

Iphigenia is the archetype of virgin sacrifice, a daughter dispossessed of her voice and body, killed for the gods, the father and the nation. From Euripides to Racine, from Gluck's opera to Cacoyannis's film, across time and media, Iphigenia has embodied the paradox of a voice that emerges as the condition of its annihilation. Hers is a choiceless choice: to consent to her sacrifice with varying degrees of fervor and possible rationales, to submit to an economy the terms of which are set by capricious gods, a reckless king, a pusillanimous father and a masculine military baying for blood. The daughter embraces her death so that the father's reputation remains intact, so that no more lives are lost in vain, so that the army can set sail. Iphigenia's sacrifice is a familiar cultural script regarding the transactional value of girls under patriarchy. Her sacrifice is the price of entry into a 'hero-industrial complex' that positions her simultaneously as protagonist and victim, savior and scapegoat.¹

The time of tragedy, like the time of opera, is repetitive like trauma, the drama-turge Sunder Ganglani observes in the program notes. It is also a time of serial killing, the repetitive slaughter of women whether by their own hand or by that of others. Sopranos die on stage over and over again with musical flourish to public applause. In Shorter and Spalding's version, the serial Iphigenias sing their suicidal swansong and die, obliging the tragic script, and allowing the winds to blow towards war. It is a small mercy that in Shorter and Spalding's rendition, Iphigenia's consent to her sacrifice verges on caricature. A first Iphigenia, girlishly clad in apple green, with matching ribbons in her hair, plucks a daisy's petals while singing 'he loves me, he loves me not' when her father slits her throat in response. Another Iphigenia is intoxicated, manhandled and passed around at a fraternity dance party and 'dies so that Greece may live'. Another slits her own throat while the army encircles her, collectively panting to orgasm.

When Iphigenia of the 'Open Tense' arrives on the scene of the crime, five girls lie dead in serial alignment next to the slain deer. esperanza Spalding appears in a silver spacesuit, tottering like a fawn, bearing antlers like a crown on her head. She embodies the continuum of the animal, the divine, the human

1. For a mention of the 'hero-industrial complex' in the context of ...(*Iphigenia*), see ArtsEmerson (2021).

and the alien in the utopian ‘other time’ summoned by Artemis in Act II. Vocalizing without words, Iphigenia of the Open Tense disrupts the grammar of tragic opera. If coloratura signifies female madness and impending doom in the western operatic tradition—Lucia di Lammermoor, Anna Bolena, Ophelia—spalding’s jazz improvisations resignify the ‘melismatic madness’ of these tragic heroines.² Her ethereal voice confounds the distinction between noise and speech, that essential cleavage between a life that can make itself audible and visible to the law, and one consigned to the abjection of mere givenness. Shorter and spalding reimagine the terms of a girl’s appearance on the operatic stage and in the public sphere.

For centuries, the condition of Iphigenia’s entry into narrative as tragedy is her willing self-sacrifice, spoken or sung, in a language that is audible to the gods, the father and the state. spalding’s wordless improvisations, however, undo the distinction between speech and noise, categories that for Jacques Rancière separate politically qualified life from given life: ‘Traditionally, in order to deny the political quality of a category—workers, women, and so on—all that was required was to assert that they belonged to a “domestic space” that was separate from public life, one from which only groans or cries expressing suffering, hunger, or anger could emerge, but not actual speech demonstrating a shared aesthesis.’³ By contrast, the shimmering jazz sung by Iphigenia of the Open Tense, in a dream space that is neither domestic nor militaristic, weaves together noise and speech and illustrates spalding’s radical resignification of opera itself as a ‘specific technology for encounters with the undomesticated and the sacred’.⁴

The time of tragedy’s open tense, a hiatus in Iphigenia’s fate, is spatialized in the pastoral setting of Act II. Five slain Iphigenias are reanimated to sing of extractive pasts in which girls, like jasmine blooms, are ‘cut, plucked, tweezed and cleaned’. They are ‘death made a permanent spectacle’. Their arias are sung in a range of registers, singular in their solos but choral in their thematic convergence on oppression, their call and response structure, their echo and merging. The serially aligned Iphigenias rise up, form dyads, clusters and circles in a constellation of voices that rupture the cyclical time of trauma and serial killing. The chorus in Act II vocalizes Wayne Shorter’s definition of improvisation as ‘entering the flow of a conversation that’s already happening’.⁵

Iphigenia of the Open Tense is characterized as ‘the dandelion sprout that cracks through the cemented myth and illuminates its clay.’ Not only does this Iphigenia blast open the ground of myth, she sheds light on its substance and surfaces other possibilities. While this germination from the burial ground of myth

2. Parr (2021), 95.

3. Rancière (2010), 46.

4. esperanza spalding’s words, uttered at ‘The Performance of Labor and the Labor of Performance’ (Cal Performances and The Black Studies Collaboratory [2022]).

5. Shorter’s definition of improvisation is reported by esperanza spalding in Cal Performances and The Black Studies Collaboratory (2022).

does not emerge into full bloom onstage, we witness the excavation—or rather, the evacuation—required for it at the opera’s conclusion. In Act III, Iphigenia abandons jazz improvisation for a shrill operatic register and steps back into her scripted fate. Her graceless grace gives way to stiff poses, in a visual echo of the inflatable mannequin identified as Helen of Troy and paraded across the stage in Act I. Iphigenia the virginal puppet mirrors Helen the sex doll. Once again enslaved by myth, Iphigenia consents to sacrifice as a condition of her visibility and value, in a response to a sister-avatar’s earlier query, ‘What is a woman but a cast-off shell, its unseen iridescence?’ But suddenly, she turns her back to the audience and begins to retch, the language of opera and the grammar of myth are viscerally expelled in heaves that gradually vibrate into wordless song. The beautiful noise is echoed by the chorus of sisters. It leaks out and penetrates the Argive masculine military complex, figured as three soldiers who walk towards an indefinite horizon, while co-improvising wordlessly to Wayne Shorter’s jazz trio.

With its fugitive melodies, ...(*Iphigenia*) unshackles the language of tragedy as well as the gendered and racial violence of opera’s script. Possibility is figured as a dandelion sprout that cracks through the ground of myth, an opening in the time of tragedy, an emesis that isn’t quite a catharsis.⁶ While Iphigenia of the Open Tense embodies futures for a fate sealed in myth, this opening is not just forward-looking, but retrospective as well. The opera is a memorial for countless Iphigenias—‘cast-off shells’ with their ‘unseen iridescence’—staged as a multiracial cast of women in vibrant costumes lying dead onstage. Their reanimation by Artemis to express their hopes and dreams in jazz form recalls another experiment in resurrection, not from tragedy and myth this time, but from a sparse historical archive. Saidiya Hartman’s critical fabulations in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* cracks the cement of forgetting and sifts through the record to reimagine the unheard voices of Black girls in American cities at the turn of the twentieth century.⁷ If the mythic Iphigenia’s re-actualization in the ‘open tense’ can be seen as a memorial to countless unseen girls who are routinely sacrificed to duty, father and nation (when not killed off), Hartman commemorates ordinary Black girls’ beautiful feats of existence, persistence and rebellion despite the color line. The wayward lives and improvised voices that emerge from the libretto and the historical archive point towards ongoing forms of social death and unfinished projects of abolition.

Can we draw links between jazz improvisation and critical fabulation, between Shorter and Spalding’s Iphigenias and the creative rebellion of young Black girls? If critical fabulation is ‘a refashioning of disfigured life’, jazz improvisation in ... (*Iphigenia*) refashions disfiguring myth.⁸ While Iphigenia and her subsequent

6. See Telò’s piece in this special issue on this point.

7. Hartman (2019).

8. Hartman (2008), 3.

avatars were trapped in the structure of tragedy that consigned them to the status of chattel, in the wake of emancipation, Black girls remained trapped in an ideology of race and gender that perpetuated the plantation's legacy. Yet the 'wayward' girls who came to cities such as New York and Philadelphia in search of freedom defied the distinction between noise and speech, between the intimate and the social realms, in acts of creative insurgency that fashioned their lives into ephemeral art. Hartman describes their resistance to ongoing captivity in post-plantation urban life as the improvisations of a jazz suite, as 'the dangerous music of open rebellion'.⁹ The chorus and chorality are leitmotifs in Hartman's imaginative reconstruction of these unruly lives and their riotous assembly.

Both ...(*Iphigenia*) and the voices of *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* narrate myth and history through the chorus rather than the protagonist or tragic hero. They decapitate the authority of monarchy, patriarchy and white supremacy to release the creative and political energies of voices whose 'untranslatable songs and seeming nonsense make good the promise of revolution'.¹⁰ *Wayward Lives* eloquently describes the music of this revolution at the Bedford Hills Reformatory for Women, where, in December of 1919, young colored girls confined to segregated cottages rose up and roared in protest. Songs and shouts were equal instruments in a rebellion that smashed the jail's furniture along with the distinction between noise and speech. Hartman evokes this eruption as abolitionist music, 'the shout and speech song as struggle'.¹¹ Her free indirect discourse translates the 'noise strike' and 'vocal outbreak' into audible language and conveys the insurgent subjectivities and collective intentions latent in these 'soundscape of rebellion and refusal'.¹² Newspapers described the Bedford Reformatory protest as noise, as 'the din of an infernal chorus' and linked this sonic revolt to Dante's inferno and jazz music, only to dismiss it as senseless: 'Devil's Chorus Sung by Girl Rioters'; 'Bedford Hears Mingled Shrieks and Squeals, Suggesting Inferno Set to Jaz(z)'; 'Purely Vocal Outbreak'.¹³ The press failed to hear the call to abolition in this beautiful music of revolt, dismissing it as animal noise, 'groans or cries expressing suffering, hunger, or anger', as Rancière puts it.¹⁴ For Hartman, the music of the riot transposed Dante's inferno into a jazz suite filled with the historical sounds of Black rebellion. The sonic tumult at Bedford redefined the relationship between noise and speech, and provisionally opened a new historical tense, 'a revolution in a minor key'.¹⁵ Dante's inferno at Bedford Reformatory, like

9. Hartman (2019), 283.

10. Hartman (2019), 348.

11. Hartman (2019), 284.

12. Hartman (2019), 279.

13. Hartman (2019), 284.

14. Rancière (2010), 46.

15. Hartman (2019), 217.

Euripides' Aulis in Shorter and Spalding's opera, are jazz improvisations that open up the tenses of history, myth and futurity.

Hartman's critical fabulations are careful acts of reading that improvise from meagre documents to recover the creative and political force of girls who improvise in chorus. The practice of listening to faint voices in the archive is echoed by Spalding, who in another music album sings that 'Hearing is a labor of reading.'¹⁶ 'Improvisation—the aesthetic possibilities that resided in the unforeseen, collaboration in the space of enclosure, the secondary rhythms of social life capable of creating an opening where there was none' are what both *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* and...(*Iphigenia*) give us to hear.¹⁷

16. Spalding (2021), 'Formwela 7'.

17. Hartman (2019), 248.