

New worlds, old dreams? Postcolonial theory and reception of Greek drama

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Varieties of the postcolonial

Classical reception in the contemporary world is almost necessarily reception within a ‘postcolonial’ context. Since the conditions of the nineteenth century, and most of the twentieth, were largely determined by the activities of the European empires as they made unprecedented inroads into other societies, most modern cultures bear the imprints of the postcolonial condition. This is the case whether we understand the ‘post’ as largely chronological or as with the more ideological force of resistance and critique. Similarly, societies are subject to the postcolonial condition whether they were originally colonising or colonized; in either situation, the experience of empire is one of the major determinants of their culture and consequently, in the field of classical reception, of the ways in which they approach Greek drama.¹

In the case of the Americas, however, the analysis is complicated by at least two factors. The first stems from the fact that ‘the Americas’ does not designate just one society; several different societies share the continents, with histories that are ‘postcolonial’ in notably different ways. The recourse to Greek drama and its receptions is correspondingly varied. While the present volume ranges impressively among different American cultures, it showcases, for instance, no First Nation contributions, and we say this not in a spirit of exhausting inclusivity but to underline the fact that the First Nation experience of genocide, an extreme version of the imperial encounter, has rendered First Nation writers much less

likely to engage with Greek drama than are writers in other American communities. There are a range of situations which may be classed as ‘postcolonial’, in the Americas as elsewhere, and classical drama will play very different roles within them. The societies which do feature in the present volume as engaging with Greek drama range from the early white settler cultures of the USA to the cultures of Latin America and the Caribbean, all of which are arguably marked with the signs of different European empires.

This complication, of the significances of the term ‘postcolonial’, which we shall shortly explore at greater length, is accompanied by a second one, which is that the Americas, particularly perhaps the USA, have long been discussed under the heading of ‘American exceptionalism’. This position, recognisable as a strand of ‘American studies’, holds that the history of the American continents is not comparable to other histories, except in very minor ways, because it is marked by unparalleled events like the first contact and the institution of African slavery. The notion that America (which in this context often implicitly stands for the USA alone) is an exception helped to make American studies ‘remarkably insular’ (Schueller 2004: 162) and resistant to theories of Western imperialism and colonialism. Even when the impulse was not ‘insular’, some commentators questioned whether theories of postcoloniality, developed first to take account of cultures in, for instance, the Indian sub-continent, were properly equipped to address the very different contours of the Americas. Jorge Klor de Alva (1995) questions whether three centuries of Latin American experience, from 1492 onwards, could usefully be summed up in this way, and Bauer and Mazzotti argue that since postcolonial theory ‘emerged from the specific historical and ideological context of the Second British Empire in Asia and Africa’ (2009: 10), it has only limited usefulness for scholarship on early America. These positions suggest a desire to discriminate carefully among different varieties of imperial subjection, and as we shall see, much recent postcolonial analysis has focussed on the need to avoid totalising gestures and to respect

specificities. But we should also bear in mind the strong connection that Robert Stam and Ella Shohat make between postcolonial analysis and the Americas. ‘If postcolonial theory did not come from America (that is, the United States), it did partially come from the Americas (that is, from the resistant thought of indigenous peoples and Afro-diasporic “minorities” in the Americas)’ (2012: 380). Here, the reflection on their subjugated condition by both indigenous peoples and imported African Americans is seen as instrumental in forging the tools of postcolonial analysis.

In the contemporary context, however, ‘postcolonial’, when used of the USA, often has the extra connotation of ‘neo-colonial’. The USA is criticized for behaving in ways similar to the European empires of the colonial period, using military force to acquire territory and resources, and to impose culture, with regards to neighbouring states in the past but also more recently in overseas locations like the Middle East. The contemporary context also troubles, and extends, the significance of ‘postcolonialism’ with an emphasis on ‘globalization’, which implicitly offers to flatten the potential political charge of the postcolonial by embracing all cultures in an unavoidable commercial and financial nexus. In what follows we shall try to explore both the various possibilities and liabilities of postcolonial analysis insofar as they are germane to the projects of the current volume. The topic is potentially huge and our treatment of it necessarily introductory, but we hope to point to the salient features of the contemporary critical context.

One of the liabilities is that it is not always clear what exactly is designated by ‘the postcolonial’ and related terms. Within academic discourse on postcolonialism, which is what chiefly concerns us here, there has been a widely recognized shift, over the last few decades, from a focus on economic and political structures to the analysis of cultural and discursive modes. This shift has been accompanied by a critique which holds that

postcolonialism, as an academic enterprise, has lost polemic edge or bite and has subsided into an abstractly theoretical discipline which is ineffective in countering the actual consequences of European activity in areas such as Africa (Olaniyan 2005). A related critique claims that ‘postcolonial’ cannot usefully name anything, because it necessarily slips among several different categories of history and culture (Parry 1997) – this is the weakness of the overall observation with which we began this essay, that the postcolonial describes the experience of most of the globe. Despite these critiques, which deserve much more attention than we can afford in this context, we shall suggest that ‘postcolonial’ can still be a productive way in which to view the Americas’ engagement with Greek drama, precisely because it brings with it attention to history, politics and culture. Only such a ramified category could attempt to approach such an extensive topic. In the context of receptions of Greek drama, postcolonial analysis can combine an attention to the strict binaries of hierarchical power, dominance and exploitation, which typically structure the colonial society and have lasting repercussions for the social formations that succeed it, with the issues of cultural transmission, hybridity, multiple and migratory identity, and voice, which tend to undermine binaries and question over-simplified divisions. Under both these aspects Greek drama has often proved a sensitive instrument with which to probe the experience of the Americas.

Varieties of the Americas

If we think of the early settler societies in the Americas, we can see that they can be described as ‘postcolonial’ in at least two different ways. Britain, France, Holland and Spain colonized the continents with settlers of European descent, who immediately laid waste to the indigenous populations; subsequent inhabitants may thus be considered ‘postcolonial’ in that both sides emerge from a situation of colonial violence and oppression. The postcolonial on

this model implicitly extends back far beyond the independence movements of the mid-twentieth century; Peter Hulme (1995: 122) notes that early settler society was ‘postcolonial’ in that ‘the United States continued to colonize North America, completing the genocide of the Native population begun by the Spanish and British’. Concerned with South rather than North America, Fernando Coronil (2007: 637) called for ‘a view of colonialism as starting from the fifteenth century [which] would offer a different understanding of modern colonialism and colonial modernity’ while Stam and Shohat 2012: 379 insist that ‘the colonial debates go back to the Reconquista and the Conquista’. Having said that, some of the crucial works that emerge in the 1990s, such as King 2000 and Singh and Schmidt 2000, do not address the early period extensively, and so do not investigate the postcolonial identity of the early settler communities.

Such communities have also been understood as ‘postcolonial’ in that they experienced a form of ‘cultural cringe’ vis à vis the European cultures. People of European descent in the Americas might variously celebrate their European identities, or resist them in favour of a newly developing ‘American’ identity, but in either case their identity was defined by relation to the European colonisers. In this vein, in the particular case of the USA, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin account it the first postcolonial society, insofar as it tries to develop a ‘national’ literature against considerable pressure from Europe: ‘In many ways the American experience and its attempts to produce a new kind of literature can be seen to be the model for all later post-colonial writing’ (1989: 16). Many commentators were quick to question this identification on a variety of grounds, and many would suggest further that the multiple forms of power wielded by the USA require more nuanced description. Jenny Sharpe writes that ‘the term *postcolonial* does not fully capture the history of a white settler colony that appropriated land from Native Americans, incorporated parts of Mexico, and imported slaves and indentured labor from Africa and Asia’ (2000: 106). White citizens of

the early USA may have been 'postcolonial' with respect to Europe, but it was hardly their only defining power relation; as Schueller 2004: 164 emphasises, 'Postcolonial readings of settler American literature...cannot ignore the simultaneous brutality of US colonization.'

Early settler societies throughout the Americas may thus be considered as 'postcolonial' in divergent ways. If we examine these cultures, we cannot necessarily identify extensive reception of Greek drama, but we can see that colonisers were assisted in assuming superiority to the indigenous populations whom they encountered by the long European tradition of written literature and history. Whether British, Dutch, French or Spanish, the colonisers saw themselves as going into virgin nature and making it over into culture, entitled to ride roughshod over indigenous societies which were not recognisably literate. Within this cultural struggle, to be able to claim some kind of descent from classical Europe was to claim participation in the highest activities of humanity – a useful move when the colonisers were both fighting among themselves, as representatives of different nations, and unleashing epochal violence against indigenous people. As an acknowledged high point of European culture, Greek drama also became valuable over time to those non-European colonized who needed to transform the European inheritance to their own ends. This centrality of the classical inheritance is recognized by one of the first studies of postcolonial drama, which features a chapter on ancient Greek sources as well as on Shakespeare (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996).

Recent work on neo-Latin in Mexico shows other ways in which early settlers drew on the classical tradition to underpin claims of European superiority, and suggests the complications that ensued. Struggles over the command of Latin could be part of the hostile traffic between Spanish colonisers and indigenes, especially when the aptitude of native Americans for learning Latin caused consternation (Zapién 2000: 13-14; see also Laird

2003), but the tradition culminates in the eighteenth century Latin epic *Rusticatio Mexicana*, which makes a claim for the equality of the New World with the ancient (Laird 2006).

Although this material does not include Greek drama, it demonstrates the range of possible significances wielded by the classical tradition in the Americas.

We cannot readily trace a history of Greek drama in the Americas until the nineteenth century. Much of the earlier, eighteenth-century engagement with classical antiquity, which we can reconstruct most easily for the USA, seems to have been driven by political rather than literary needs. Scholars like Ward Briggs (2007) and Margaret Malamud (2010, 2011), following Meyer Reinhold, have shown how the classical tradition was invoked to signify civic virtue, but might also be rejected because of its connections with monarchical Europe. The elite of the new republic drew on classical tropes to help them in their nation-building, assisted by the notion of classical antiquity as a possession of the Enlightenment and thus available for deployment in different contexts where reason and order were at stake.

Classical languages and texts held an important place in education, although they also came under question as being impractical and suited to neither of the republic's characteristic pursuits of agriculture and commerce (Briggs 2007). In the nineteenth century, neo-classical architecture transformed the American built environment, again in the service of a political agenda; 'The utilization of the architectural language of Rome...created a deeply satisfying illusion of imperial grandeur, civic order, prosperity, and authority' (Malamud 2010: 259).

Drama also began to gain a foothold. Briggs 2007: 290 cites the first performance of a Greek drama as the *Oedipus Tyrannus* produced at Harvard in 1881. The run lasted a week and an estimated six thousand people saw the play; there were other performances in schools and at Randolph Macon Women's College. More recently, Boshier and Macintosh in this volume have shown that there were probably more nineteenth-century performances and productions of Greek drama than scholars previously realized. In these contexts, little anxiety is

expressed that the symbols of classical antiquity signify the superiority of European culture over American. The reception of classical antiquity appears to have been largely untroubled by the kinds of cultural struggle for identity and voice that are so often characteristic of the postcolonial predicament, and the tradition was welcomed as helping rather than hindering the production of an American identity.

But these engagements with classical antiquity, on the part of a culture which is now among the supreme global powers, are hardly the kinds of things that are routinely named postcolonial. It is when the subaltern populations of the Americas – women, the poor and working-class, but especially those of non-European descent – get hold of Greek drama that it becomes more relevant to invoke postcolonial analysis.² ‘Once we begin to think of Native Americans, Mexican Americans, African Americans, and Asian Americans as part of the subjects of America, the questions raised by a postcolonial American studies rapidly change’ (Schueller 2004: 164). An important strand of the debate about the postcolonial status of the Americas is thus the notion of ‘internal colonization’, naming the relation of white settlers, in the US, to both Native Americans and African American slaves, and often also to Latin American populations. In this connection Sharpe writes ‘when used to describe the United States, *postcolonial* does not name its past as a white settler colony or its emergence as a neo-colonial power; rather, it designates the presence of racial minorities and Third World immigrants’ (2000: 104). Other critics concur: ‘The third world perspective returns us to the origins of the American experience, reminding us that this nation owes its very existence to colonialism, and that along with settlers and immigrants there have always been conquered Indians and black slaves, and later defeated Mexicans - that is, colonial subjects - on national soil’ (Blauner 2001: 46). For many commentators, then, the USA is a postcolonial society with respect to its minority populations, which struggle, so these commentators hold, with the same kinds of issues as face people in other societies that have emerged from colonialism.

Populations in Latin America and the Caribbean can also be considered by this approach; even though they have mostly emerged from Spanish, British or French colonialism, and are not ‘internal’ to the USA, they are often understood as more or less subject to USA political and cultural intervention. This is not the only way to describe the internal divisions of American societies, but it is productive, especially if we accept that what postcolonial analysis primarily addresses are the social and cultural corollaries of organising legal and economic powers to discriminate among populations along lines of conquest. Postcolonial analysis will then be closely bound up with issues of inequality, its maintenance and demolition, identity, voice, migration, and the ownership and transmission of culture and tradition. Resistance to imperial domination will be seen to link different ‘colonized’ populations on the American continents as it has done populations elsewhere, for instance in Africa. All of these concerns may be read in the American reception of Greek drama, as the chapters in this volume eloquently show.

To describe relations among different cultures in the USA as ‘postcolonial’ in the sense of ‘internal colonization’ has proved fruitful for many critics. But analyses of internal colonization in the Americas immediately imply issues of race, because the largest single subjugated population in the USA has historically been the African American.³ It is not always clear exactly how we should theorise the mutual implication of postcolonialism and race. A recent argument insists that ‘Race is the key prism through which all postcolonial analysis is refracted’ (Nayar 2010: 1), but other coordinations are possible. Many would agree that historically, empire and race have been mutually defining – the justifications of empire being built on the notion of inferior races, which were then confirmed in their inferiority by conquest and exploitation. In the case of the USA, Stam and Shohat (2012: 376) suggest that ‘the settler colonialism that dispossessed the ‘Red’ and the racial slavery that exploited the ‘Black’ were the twin engines of racial supremacy’ working together to

entrench the power of the new republic. Many would also stress that it is important not to collapse the categories together so that race is subsumed. Thus Schueller (2004: 168) criticises both King 2000 and Singh and Schmidt 2000 for not confronting race consistently within their postcolonial frameworks, and notes that ‘minority groups risk being homogenized if race is simply kept out of the picture’. Postcolonial analysis that dispenses with the idea of race is, she suggests, ‘shorn of power dynamics and systemic oppression’ (2004: 169).

Others are eager to show how the divisions of racial politics on the American continents have participated in ‘structures of dominance’ (S. Hall 1980) that are shared by other postcolonial societies. Ann Stoler notes the many scholars who compare the plantation societies of the Old South to institutions in ‘British, French and Dutch colonies of Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean’ (2001: 841-2). Such work implicitly undermines American exceptionalism by a focus on how related patterns of exploitation and discrimination emerge repeatedly across the globe. Conversely, the debates on race that have so often informed the public discourse of the Americas can be understood in a global perspective. Thus Howard Winant writes (2000: 170)

The social movements and revolutionary upsurges that succeeded the [second world] war and brought the colonial era to an end also raised the problematic of race to a new level of prominence. The civil rights movement in the United States and the anti-apartheid mobilization in South Africa are but the most prominent examples of this. As it gained its independence, the postcolonial world was quickly embroiled in the competition of the Cold War, a situation that placed not only the legacy of imperial rule but also the racial policies of the superpowers (especially those of the United States) under additional scrutiny.

Understanding of race is here shown to be entwined with the history of colonial and anti-colonial struggle. But Winant also shows that the two are distinct from each other when he goes on to question how racial injustice persists in an era without empire. ‘Empires have been ended and Jim Crow and apartheid abolished (at least officially). How then is continuing racial inequality and bias to be explained?’ (2000: 171). Neither ‘race’ nor ‘the postcolonial’ can be analysed without each other, but they are not the same thing.

African American classical tradition

The African American population of the USA is the most closely defined by the term ‘internal colonization’, and most extensively oppressed by the discourse of ‘race’. When we turn to the reception of Greek drama within this population, there is a substantial critical discourse already in place. As the discipline of classics has become more open and demotic, in line with many other twentieth century developments, so it has elaborated an understanding of itself that modifies its traditional Eurocentrism, and it now pays sustained attention to reception in many global contexts. To an extent, the African American reception of Greek drama can stand as a case study for ‘postcolonial’ reception in the Americas generally, although as we shall go on to show, there are other dimensions in other parts of the continents. What is especially ‘postcolonial’ about African American reception is that the classics are acknowledged as part of the cultural equipment of the white Europeans who brought Africans to the American continent as slaves, so that the classics themselves cannot help but operate to some extent as a sign of subjugation. To take on this tradition within African American writing, then, risks internalising subjection; this is the problem ‘inherent in every black humanism that inherits the legacy of Western canonicity and knowledge’ (Orrells et al 2011: 13). Indeed, we could argue that the very gesture of focussing on African

American deployment of the classics risks reinscribing the classics as necessarily white, and ‘humanist’ or ‘universal’ only under the white aegis. African American culture has defied these proliferating hazards by claiming the classical tradition as its own. In the context of slavery, for instance, the classical past was invoked by slavers and abolitionists alike, so that a potentially pernicious resource was forced to yield some dividend (Hall, Alston and McConnell 2011). The famous ex-slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass represents himself as learning how to organise discourse and sway audiences from the Ciceronian repertoire of *The Columbian Orator*, one of the premiere school texts of the period (Goings and O’Connor 2011), and Phillis Wheatley mobilises the classical repertoire in her poetry, deploying the highly recognisable symbols to construct a persona that might well have struck contemporary readers as ‘American’ in its religious affiliations and sense of community, even as it also draws attention to the writer’s identity as black, African, and enslaved.

This dialectical situation, where the classics are simultaneously means of oppression and tools for liberation, is recognisable in other colonial contexts such as India (Vasunia 2013). After emancipation, the persistent authority of the classical languages could offer cultural capital (Walters 2007: 51), even to the extent that the white establishment wished to prevent African Americans from learning the languages. Michele Ronnick (2006) has unearthed the difficult histories of early black classicists, and Kenneth Goings and Eugene O’Connor have documented the struggles among black students to continue classical education in the face of various kinds of opposition. Malamud sums up thus: ‘Knowledge of the classics offered intellectual enrichment, a usable past, civic guidance, and cultural virtue to African Americans’ (2011: 73). The classics here enable participation rather than forbidding it.

What particular aspects of classical antiquity helped to serve African Americans in this way? One feature was a tradition in which Africa predated the classical world, and helped to form it, via the power of Egypt over ancient Greece. This was very relevant to critics and writers in Africa, who mobilised this version of classical antiquity in their anti-colonial writings from the mid-nineteenth century (Selden 1998, Goff 2013), but it was also important to African Americans in their struggles against slavery and discrimination. Although Bernal's *Black Athena*, which first brought this version of Africa into widespread scholarly acknowledgement, did not investigate African American writings, recent work, such as Keita 2011, has reconstructed this tradition, in which knowledge of classical antiquity is used to construct defences against racial terror and hatred.

As well as offering this resource for polemic, the cultural authority of the classics is such that its metaphors of continuity can be useful to a population who were early deprived of much of their own traditions. Due to its many mythic ramifications, moreover, the classical tradition can meld with other mythic traditions, and with folklore, to produce resonant narratives. Classical images and metaphors have thus been found independently useful to African American creative expression, as well as helping to signify African American participation in the making of America and in the making of antiquity itself. But while the classical tradition can thus be made inclusive and even salvific, it is important not to lose sight of the subversive and rebellious politics of African American reception. To rewrite classical texts or artefacts from within African American discourse is always potentially a gesture of protest and defiance, turning European supremacy's weapons against itself. As Orrells et al note, the very movement of Africans into the Americas, under the compulsion of Europeans, produced the cultural intersections which meant that 'European constructions of the past, present and future would not go uncontested' (2011:8). Instead, 'the deployment of classical texts and images by African Americans enabled profound revisions of white

hegemonic historical narratives' (2011: 10). In a plural movement, then, African American creative writers have contributed to the African American literary tradition, the classical tradition, and the American tradition; in the same way, the American tradition includes work that is classically-descended and work that is descended from Africa. Within this plurality, the African American classical voice can acknowledge subjection and exclusion, but also refuse to be confined by these, and instead find symbols and metaphors with which to construct a viable future, as well as a usable past.

African American reception of Greek drama has become an important genre, even if the plays are not very many, with some like *The Darker Face of the Earth* moving straight from theatrical performance to university syllabi. Recent scholarly works have both drawn new attention to such dramas and offered theoretical models with which to address them. Initially, Gilbert and Tompkins (1996) promulgated the model of 'canonical counter-discourse', in which the colonized 'write back' to the imperial centre using the centre's own texts, the canon, against it; in the African American context the 'centre' would be the European tradition of classical culture, which would be the object of critique and protest. The notion of canonical counter-discourse was criticized, however, for re-inscribing the centre-margins dichotomy which helped to fuel imperial fantasies of European domination in the first place. A few years after Gilbert and Tompkins, Kevin Wetmore (2003) describes African American adaptations of Greek drama in a tripartite scheme. 'Black Orpheus' names a Eurocentric tradition whereby the 'African', here the African American, is explained by the Greek; 'Black Athena' names those few Afrocentric works which explicitly derive Greek drama from African traditions; and Wetmore seeks to type many of his chosen dramas as 'Black Dionysus' because they work in a 'counter-hegemonic, subversive manner' (2003: 11). Subsequent critics acknowledge the importance of Wetmore's contributions while sometimes querying his terminology (Van Weyenberg 2011: 335).

Several writers on African American reception of Greek drama have also been concerned with analysing African receptions; among these, Hardwick (2004, 2005, 2006) and Budelmann (2005) have been inclined to posit the possibilities of ‘decolonization’ made available by the receptions, while Goff and Simpson (2007) have stressed the continuing need to struggle with oedipal models of colonial violence. More focussed on the works of African American writers are Rankine 2006 and Walters 2007, which together offer further reflections on the use of writerly ‘craft’, rhetoric, and myth in ‘black classicism’. Rankine urges that ‘Black writers have always been interested in the classics and have at times used them to master their own American experience... [and] to engage immediate concerns of racism and oppression’ (2006: 3). Walters further suggests that the classics can offer ‘a liberating space to engage readers in a feminist critique of the misrepresentation, silencing, and subjugation of Black women both in literature and society’ (2007: 51). This version of the classical voice is implicitly counter to more prevalent types of postcolonial critique.

While Greenwood 2009 provides a helpful overview of several of these works of criticism, her own book (2010) focuses on the Caribbean, and shows how writers and intellectuals trade representations of ancient Greece, as well as other cultural goods, not in neat hierarchical models but in a plurality of ‘fragmented’ and even ‘chaotic’ relationships, which include African and African American cultures. Greenwood foregrounds the ‘frail connections’ (2010: 1) by which such representations circulate, and suggests that Caribbean writers use the classical in the spirit of ‘antagonistic cooperation’ (2010: 15). Her discussions of classics in Caribbean educational and political discourses suggest ways in which the different postcolonial sites of the Americas may be linked in their engagements with classical antiquity. Similar perspectives are offered by *African Athena: new agendas*. Although there is no specific discussion of African American reception of Greek drama, there are several enquiries into other African-descended uses of classical material in the Americas, such as

historiography, and the editors, in the wake of Bernal, suggest that we consider distinctions between ancient and modern, classical and postcolonial, as artificially imposed on a global culture ‘always and already hybrid’ (Orrells et al 2011: 13.) While this critical stance is productive, the subversive, combative politics of African American adaptations of Greek drama, in their historical specificity, may be at risk of dissolution in this gesture.

The most recent study of ‘black classicism’ is Cook and Tatum’s *African American Writers and Classical Tradition* (2012). This comprehensive celebration embraces the plurality of African American responses to the classics, and thus implicitly rejects any postcolonial framework. Not only is there no one model for African American response, there is also no ‘single notion of Greco-Roman classics informing African American writers’ (2012: 3). Each chapter adopts a different perspective on its chosen writer/s, and while no theoretical synthesis is offered, the book is lavish with close readings and stylistic analyses that pay full respect to the ‘craft’ of the writers. What is perhaps likely to be controversial about this volume, along with the absence of wider claims, is that the ‘craft’ may sometimes seem to outweigh the politics (2012: 4), implicitly undervaluing the cultural struggles outlined above.

Taken together, these scholarly works celebrate the creativity of African Americans in the face of a classical tradition that has often been interpreted as hostile to their interests, but they also implicitly question the usefulness of ‘postcolonial’ as a term of analysis, by repeatedly focussing on creative freedom rather than its constraints. They also implicitly question the category of ‘African American’ by making links to Africa, the Caribbean, and other societies that have emerged from colonial occupation. While the debate about identities and differences between ‘African’ and ‘African American’ has a long history of its own, it is rendered newly interesting by the latest contribution to reception of Greek drama in the

Americas, *Black Odysseys* by Justine McConnell (2013). This takes an explicitly postcolonial stance on its subjects, which embraces not only American writers of African descent but also writers in the Caribbean and South Africa. Crucial for this book is the fact that the ‘postcolonial responses’ to the *Odyssey*, including the dramatic, are found to be plural, and to ‘differ radically from each other’ (2013: 3). The increasing sophistication of analysis of postcolonial reception of Greek drama, in the Americas, has also offered increasingly fine-grained descriptions which value differences as much as they do an emphasis on the shared experience of empire and subjugation.

Other American classical traditions

We suggested above that African American reception of Greek drama raises issues that are relevant to the rest of the Americas in their different experiences of colonization, internal colonization, and postcoloniality. This initial position must now be somewhat modified, because the African American case shows so many internal differences that it cannot immediately stand for all the other cases, and indeed is itself susceptible of several kinds of examination. In this context we may recall that ‘neither the term postcolonial nor words such as diaspora, migrant, or transnational... [should be] used in such a broad way as to erase the many constituencies and communities of people’ (Singh and Schmidt 2000: 39). While the expansive, comprehensive terms of analysis are useful, they must almost always be modified in the encounter with a particular text. For our purposes, the reception of Greek drama in the Caribbean, or in Latin America, may sometimes be seen to overlap with African American reception, but must sometimes be examined in its specificities.

A wide range of ‘postcolonial’ interpretations of the Latin American tradition of Greek drama reception is possible. Edith Hall has recently suggested an emphatically postcolonial understanding of Alfonso Reyes’ *Ifigenia Cruel*; she reads the play as part of Mexican nation-building in the wake of Spain’s loss of her last colonies (2013: 275). Orestes is criticized for travelling across the sea to make incursions into the peaceful, pastoral society of Tauris (278), and the whole play is interpreted as a meditation on the nature of ‘home’, ‘exile’ and ‘return’ in a world disfigured by empire and colonialism. Yet Moira Fradinger, in her recent work on Latin American receptions of Antigone, implicitly queries the usefulness of the ‘postcolonial’ identification. She points out that the history of Antigone in South America cannot be confined to reflexes about European colonization, because the plays pit European-descended settlers variously against Indians and against each other, along lines of class and gender. ‘The large web of intertextual relations and literary communities associated with the Greek myth in the region goes back to the nineteenth century and is embedded in two centuries of national debates over the meaning of modernity’ (2011: 67). Fradinger suggests instead that the Argentine Antigones develop into a ‘national tradition’ of reflection on political foundations (2011: 68).

Between the two American hemispheres, and slightly off centre from Central America, lies, of course, the Caribbean, where different and competing waves of imperial occupation have moved, serially, symmetrically or asymmetrically, island by island. In this geographically disparate and historically dynamic region, the postcolonial has some purchase. Of all the plays that might be treated as representing the reception of Greek drama within the Americas, especially with a postcolonial slant, one of the most compelling is Derek Walcott’s *The Odyssey: A Stage Version*. There is some irony here, since this work was commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company and premiered in Stratford-upon-Avon in July 1992. A play by a Caribbean artist produced in the heart of England thus exemplifies the American

reception of Greek drama. More significant than this diasporic irony is the fact that the canvass of Walcott's *Odyssey* does not appear as evidently postcolonial. We want to focus, for an interval, on Walcott's creative theorization of a globalized Caribbean that can take the postcolonial in its stride.

Like Homer's Odysseus, Walcott's version is a 'sacker of cities', motivated by prospects of plunder, but he is also characterised as much more impelled to return 'home', as this term recurs throughout the text. To Thersites, the mercenary, he not only expresses this priority but he also tries to convert Thersites to it, unavailingly. His dalliance with Circe is likewise presented as 'for the crew's sake' (78). In the oppressive state where the Cyclops, as 'the Eye', dominates indigenous human subjects, his intervention appears clearly as a liberation for the human community, as well as an escape for himself and his surviving crew.

As in Homer's *Odyssey*, Walcott's protagonist brings with him standards of community that do not apply in the societies that he visits, and which he cannot impose, even as he finds devious, even dubious means to defend these standards for the sake of his crew and himself. These standards are, of course, tested in the process, as when the Homeric Odysseus performs the calculation that results in six of his crewmen being sacrificed to Scylla; this results from a rational calculation of risk that itself risks contradicting the principles of community that require the calculation to be made in the first place.

For all the ruthless resourcefulness of Homer and Walcott's versions of Odysseus, he is not able, or even inclined, to operate as a coloniser in any of the communities or anti-communities that he encounters. The standards that he brings with him are not embedded there after he has made his grateful, and often hasty exits from these places. Only in the Cyclops' state is there the implication of a lasting change brought by Odysseus, but this state seems a special case because it is identified with the historical Greece of the Colonels'

military rule. Of this oppressive state Odysseus asks, incredulously: 'Is this the Greece that I loved? Is this my city?', whereupon the Philosopher replies, 'Philosophy's cradle, where Thought is forbidden' (61). Odysseus's decimation of the Cyclops' power can be understood not as the act of a coloniser, but rather as an exceptional, initially philhellenic gesture, which ultimately liberates the ideals of Greece from 'the era of the grey Colonels' (62), so that they may once again inspire other, 'unknown archipelagoes' (59). If anything, Walcott's Odysseus, in particular, as he struggles to return from Troy, is quite systematically purged of any colonialist impulses. His mind is effectively decolonised by the various failures and costs of colonisation, at Troy, on Calypso's island, and in the underworld. In the event, any such intrinsic colonialist motivation on his part is reckoned as marginal, since the play recalls (151), in an intervention by Eumaeus absent from Homer, the test set by Palamedes to determine whether Odysseus was feigning madness in order to escape recruitment for the mission to Troy. Odysseus duly fails the test and must unwillingly go.

Notwithstanding the various signs of Odysseus as a reluctant and then lapsing colonialist, there are several related aspects of Walcott's Odysseus that bespeak an imperial will to power and which place him, as protagonist, at some variance with the poets Phemius and Demodocus, within the play.⁴ Nestor characterises him as one who 'reduced to reason every omen' (26), and later Athena amplifies this observation when she responds to Odysseus's question, 'What sins, dazzling Athena, marked me from men?', thus: 'You mocked the immortal ones... You are the first to question the constant shining' (119). He gamely rejoins, 'With good reason' (119), and she echoes Nestor more closely: 'The first to discount each omen!' (119). Well beyond the world of Homeric epic, Walcott's Odysseus here represents the Greek Enlightenment, centred on Athens. Meanwhile, the responses to him on the part of Nestor, and especially of Athena, may plot the limitations of that Enlightenment, as the ancient authorities are questioned and 'reduced'. Just as the

Enlightenment questioned itself in Athens, via such critical reflections on reason as Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, so Odysseus's definitive characteristic of reason is remarked as conspicuous by mortals and immortals alike.

Where Odysseus's reason is most imperial, in the event, is back in Ithaca, which, like Troy, invites conquest and colonisation, but, like all the other communities that he has encountered, cannot be so treated. Ithaca is different from both, as it is from Odysseus's memory of it, so that none of his experiences prepares him for what must be done, and not done. For Walcott's Odysseus in particular, reason seems the one asset that he possesses for himself, beyond the possible loyalty of others to him. Only this faculty might allow him to abstract from his alien experiences in order to draw out resources to address a home that is itself become alien. The conclusions that this faculty draws, however, are wanting, as becomes clear in Walcott's reunion of Penelope and Odysseus.

Having insinuated himself in to his old household, appraised the field of forces, tested the potential loyalty of allies, revealed himself or been recognised, and having led the extermination of the suitors, Odysseus is now confronted by Penelope, still unacknowledged in his identity. Penelope enters as Odysseus is compulsively refiguring the scene of carnage in terms of his previous experiences, at Troy, on the high seas, in the Underworld; in this context, he glosses the dead Antinous, leader of the suitors, as a log from the sea and as Ajax from both Troy and Hades. Eumaeus glosses Odysseus's words, in turn: 'This is a madness that I've seen on him before' (151). Eumaeus equates Odysseus's behaviour now with his conduct when Palamedes first came calling to enlist Odysseus for Troy. But there is an incongruity, even contradiction here: the insanity with which he equates it was, in fact, feigned. Penelope's response to Odysseus's current 'madness', when she enters just after Eumaeus' intervention, is consistent with this fact: 'This cunning beggar is the smartest of

suitors' (153). Unlike Eumaeus and Telemachus, Penelope grasps Odysseus's orgy of refiguration as his latest ruse, motivated by his reason. There is also a lurking implication: the reason of the coloniser may look like insanity to the colonised, and vice versa. Whether Penelope or Eumaeus is correct, Odysseus's comportment suddenly changes, at Penelope's challenge, and rationality returns. It is a rationality, however, for which Penelope rapidly weaves some parameters by precluding certain permutations: 'This is not Troy. I'm not Menelaus' whore' (154). As Odysseus extrapolates from his past experiences to try and control the present, he begins to impose a grid on Ithaca which Penelope fears would 'make this a second Troy!' (154). Much more than Homer's character, Walcott's Penelope asserts herself against the ready recycling of a colonialist past.

This danger is highlighted by a self-conscious strain throughout Walcott's *Odyssey*, whereby characters sense such repetitions. As readers or spectators, we are incited, even challenged, to identify internal echoes and equations. These two perspectives, from outside the play and from within, correspond respectively with the narrative perspective of Walcott's text, standing above the action, in a postcolonial scene occupied by Billy Blue, and with the dramatic perspective embedded within the action, where a violent colonial past and a decolonisation of the mind are experienced. One of the effects of recasting Odysseus as a dramatic character is that his narrative to the Phaeacians does not figure as qualitatively different from the rest of the action; it unfolds in the present like the rest, save for the slender narrative frame inhabited by Billy Blue. A crucial implication of this effect is that Odysseus's narrative to Alcinous's court is not set off as poetry, as it is in Homer's epic, and Odysseus himself is not ranked with the singers Phemius, Demodocus or Billy Blue. Walcott's Odysseus is figured more singularly as a creature of reason, rather than poetry, devising his way to survival and homecoming. It is there that Penelope forces some reflexivity into his reason, so that it becomes more than an instrument for calculating means

towards unexamined, historically repetitive ends. He is thus forced to confront who he is and how he has become so: ‘Monsters... We make them ourselves’ (160).

More vividly than his earlier *Omeros*, Walcott’s *Odyssey* admits colonial history and decolonisation into the frame, not only as preludes to a properly postcolonial cultural scene where European literary traditions are potentially as available to Caribbean subjects as any other traditions, but also as historical experiences that can still be felt. Perhaps only the katabasis in *Omeros*, where Achille undergoes a reversed Middle Passage to Africa, either equals or exceeds this poignant characteristic of the play. Yet this *Odyssey* is aligned with *Omeros* in a more crucial respect. Even as Walcott’s *Odyssey* may accord a more immediate profile to colonial history and decolonisation, behind an achieved postcolonial present, it seems to repeat the emphasis of *Omeros* on the permeability of subject positions under imperialism, whereby all are closely touched by past injustices and present justifications, as well as by some imaginative liberty within and from them. In Walcott’s Odysseus, we may trace the figure of Achille the fisherman, in *Omeros*, as he washes his boat: recalling, from the night before, Bob Marley’s song ‘Buffalo Soldier’, and the line ‘Heart of America’, he imagines himself not as such a soldier in the American Civil War, fighting for his own interest, against racial slavery, but rather as a cowboy shooting ‘Indians’, as depicted by Hollywood. The following historical simile is applied to the victims of Achille’s fantasised adventure: ‘like Aruacs before the muskets of the Conquistadors’ (161). The Aruacs were the indigenous people of the Caribbean, and, crucially, *Omeros* begins with a scene in which Achille and other African-Caribbean fisherman cut down the ancient trees of the Aruacs to build their boats. A powerful implication of Walcott’s epic is that the European imperial project recruits everyone to its violence, just as Odysseus, as a reluctant colonialist, is dragged to Troy in Walcott’s play. Even those who are later victims of colonialism become instrumental in the ultimate displacement and forgetting of the earlier victims.

Such unwilling, unwitting complicity may be a further extreme of Rankine's notion of Ulysses in black. Walcott's *Odysseus* can certainly range beyond a Caribbean ambit into the Americas, as well as into the European culture that was exported to both. In doing so, however, he also brings with him an African heritage, in the form of the stories that Eurycleia, the 'black' Egyptian 'slave and nurse' (9), has formatively told both to him and to Telemachus. It is, furthermore, no coincidence that Eurycleia helps Penelope to reintegrate Odysseus into the community, as she protects Melanthe from him. Such a late effort sustains Eurycleia's mission, as declared: 'Is Egypt who cradle Greece till Greece mature' (9). The reception of Greek dramas into the Americas may be understood as a further nourishing stage in this long maturation. In Walcott's *Odyssey* in 1992, that postcolonial maturation manifests itself, in Stratford, England, as a Caribbean version of a global, or world, culture that archly recognises, but is historically deeper than, the cultural globalization that is regularly identified with the proliferation of American popular culture.

Beyond the postcolonial?

Postcolonial analysis has been crucial to the humanities in recent decades, but with its dominance have come criticisms. Many commentators have expressed unease about the ways in which the categories of postcolonial analysis can be made to obscure other important types of difference, notably those of class and gender, which we have seen registered in the plays treated above. Thus even Homi Bhabha, a critic often identified with postcolonial theory in its more abstract versions, worries that the debate has been 'focused perhaps too exclusively on the culture wars, the politics of identity, and the politics of recognition' instead of on 'social equity' (2004: xviii). Without a plurality of large identifications such as

race, gender or class, it is hard to mount any effective politics, to account for lived experience, or to render the complexity of significant postcolonial texts. Yet Schueller notes that as late as 2000, the essays collected in King 2000 hardly discuss gender (2004: 168). In the same volume, however, Sharpe is very clear on the necessity to theorise class together with race and postcoloniality, and goes so far as to state that ‘internal colonization is only an analogy for describing the economic marginalization of racial minorities’ (2000: 106). The ‘postcolonial’ terms have thus to be modified, or rather expanded, in order to account properly for the dynamics of American cultures, and crucially to ameliorate them.

Another strand of criticism is that which suggests that postcolonialism ‘throws limited light on the world we now face’ (Coronil in Yaeger 2007: 636) because it does not readily encompass the relatively new phenomenon of globalization. Globalization, within academic discourse, appears under several different headings. As Brennan 2004: 122 writes, ‘On the one hand, it holds out hope for the creation of new communities and unforeseen solidarities; on the other hand, it appears merely to euphemize corporatization and imperial expansion’.⁵ Both these versions invite further scrutiny. While postcolonialism offered insights into a variety of links between the metropolis and the colonies, globalization can suggest that the entire world is becoming ‘a single social space’ (Brennan 2004: 123), constructed by the free circulation of money and information as well as by unprecedented movements of populations. If there is indeed such a transformation underway, it is appropriate that commentators seek to render it properly via new models which move beyond postcolonial polarities of colonizer and colonized, centre and periphery, in order to draw on more mobile terms like transnationalism and border theory.

Since the Americas already constitute a continental space comprised of plural nations, and several borders, it has proved central to such theorizing. Katherine Sugg suggests that in

a period when 'an emerging "cultural politics" of hybridity and post-national identities supersedes the nation-state-based identities and oppositional politics of immigrant paradigms' commentators need to account for the newly globalized context, and 'the move to the transnational vantage of the Americas offers that accounting, as does the popularity of transnational paradigms such as *latinidad* and "the border-lands" (2004: 229-231). She goes on to show how the Americas have contributed to the new paradigms: 'Border theory, the enterprise that began in scholarship and writing focused on the US-Mexico border ... has expanded its critical reach across the Americas and into theories of contemporary world cultures, postcoloniality, and globalization' (231).

The Americas are also relevant because the plurality of peoples who share the continents gives rise to flexible models which allow for complex relations among different communities, many of whom might be termed 'postcolonial' in one way or another: 'Román de la Campa offered the model of the "split state" as a means of conceptualizing those Latino communities in the US who maintain economic, familial, and cultural ties to the various homeland nations in Latin America and the Caribbean from which (and to which) they migrate' (Sugg 2004: 228). The Americas appear here under the sign of transnational globalization insofar as the communities within them forge various ties that cannot be comprehended by a model of centre and periphery, or even of imperial exploitation. Globalized transnationalism offers to render the nation-state, as a term of analysis, redundant, thus decreasing the purchase of 'postcolonialism' as an apt description for the contemporary world.

Some commentators also suggest that globalization, understood in these ways, will put an end to race. Winant (2000: 171) outlines the position: 'Some would argue that since racial injustice is at least tendentially diminishing, the race concept is finally being obviated:

In the globalized twenty-first century, world society and transnational culture will finally attain a state of colorblindness and racial (or better, ethnic) pluralism'. But he appends a more skeptical caveat: 'Others note that this new situation ... provides a much prettier fig leaf for policies of laissez-faire vis-a-vis continuing racial exclusion and inequality than any intransigent white supremacy could ever have offered'. What if 'globalization' is merely a new name for the atavistic drive of capital to find ever more markets, exploit ever more workers, drain resources from ever more territory? 'Globalization' would then figure as a new form of untrammelled imperial exploitation as multinational corporations, usually enriching people who live in the white west and north, extract rich resources, and poorly paid labor, from people who live in the non-white south and east. Thus Schueller stresses the dimensions of globalization which see 'gross economic inequities unleashed by multinational corporations as well as the one-way movement of American pop culture to Third World countries' (2004: 170). She links the economic to the cultural as parallel means of domination, suggesting that goods and information do not circulate the globe so much as move in restricted directions determined by familiar neocolonial hierarchies. Germane to our enquiry here is that 'globalization' is often understood bluntly as the 'Americanization' of the world, as we noted above in our discussion of Walcott.

The enquiry into globalization shares concerns with yet another way to critique postcolonialism. Some scholars argue that postcolonialism is an empty term because we are *not* yet out of the age of empire. Even for Edward Said, the founder of the academic discipline, postcolonialism became a 'misnomer' that did not sufficiently recognize the persistence of neocolonialism, imperialism, and 'structures of dependency' (2002: 2). Such critics often claim that the USA in particular is a neo-colonial power; after the Second World War, the argument goes, the USA compromised its anti-imperial credentials in favor of becoming 'successor to the European empires' (Gilroy 2004: 3), wielding both 'hard' and

‘soft’ power with respect to neighboring territories like the Caribbean and the Philippines in the twentieth century, and, more recently, with respect to nations in the Middle East. These questions have been posed with renewed vigor in the wake of the attacks of 9/11, which have led the USA both to invade other countries and to institute the highly colonial practices of torture and detention without trial. These ‘novel geopolitical rules’, as Paul Gilroy scorchingly terms them (2004: 3), in an analysis that makes clear the colonial antecedents of such practices (2004: 20-1), are supported in the ideological sphere by the construction of the ‘war against terror’ as a ‘clash of civilizations’ which brooks no compromise because it is fundamentally a clash of civilization with barbarism. This construction in turn results in the various calls for the USA to take on the mantle of empire explicitly; hence the ‘repeated invocations of differences between our civilization and their barbarity, entreaties for a “new imperialism” and calls for reinstating a nineteenth-century type of colonialism, now with the US replacing Britain and France’ (Schueller 2004: 162). Not only is the condition of the world postcolonial, but it is sufficiently consciously postcolonial to desire the return of empire.

This essay has canvassed some ways in which postcolonial analysis might be fruitful for assessing the reception of Greek drama in the Americas, but has also drawn attentions to limitations in ‘postcolonialism’ and to the ways in which the critical conversation is moving beyond it. We can conclude that it is appropriate to consider reception of Greek drama in the Americas under the heading of ‘postcolonial’, because the Americas are home to an incredibly diverse population which has been marked by a series of empires in a variety of ways, and because the Americas is a site in which colonial, postcolonial and neo-colonial tensions have been worked out in a plurality of forms since the inception of modernity. Yet how might the last two points raised, on globalization and neo-colonialism, be relevant for understanding Greek drama in the Americas? This chapter cannot, of course, anticipate the

findings of the rest of this volume, but we can say that the volume itself is driven by a comprehensively global notion of the Americas, paying attention to reception in numerous locations and offering a number of ways to read strategic similarities and differences. We can also see that many of the later receptions are produced by people of non-European descent, so that the issues of unequal political power, of hemispheric dominance by white USA culture, will be in play, even as many other issues, including those of class and gender, may clamor for attention. Conversely, the volume makes clear that Greek drama, with its relentless attention to political power and rhetoric, and its scrutiny of corruption of all kinds, can prove a sharp critical instrument for examining the Americas.

¹ The distinctions that can be made between the terms ‘colonial’ and ‘imperial’ are not germane to our purposes here.

² On the subaltern see Nayar 2010: 93-96.

³ We use race here not as a scientific category, which of course it is not, but in the way suggested by Winant 2000: 170: ‘World history has, arguably, been racialized at least since

the rise of the modern world system; racial hierarchy remains global even in the postcolonial present; and popular concepts of race, however variegated, remain in general everyday use almost everywhere.’

⁴ Hamner reads ‘an imperialist mind-set’ (2001: 383) in Walcott’s *Odysseus* and identifies him with *Robinson Crusoe* (385-6). Martyniuk (2005) follows suit, but also reads the play’s role reversals within colonial relations. Hardwick’s 1996 reading of the Cyclops episode is sensitive to the play’s exposure of easy polarities.

⁵ Brennan goes on to suggest five different models of ‘globalization’, but they can be understood largely as occupying points on a spectrum between these two possibilities.