

BOOK REVIEW

Classicisms in the Black Atlantic. Edited by IAN MOYER, ADAM LECZNAR, AND HEIDI MORSE. Classical Presences. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp xiv + 338. Hardback, \$150. ISBN 0198814127

This volume is a groundbreaking study of how Classical texts, tropes, figures, art, myths and history have been received, used, deployed and interpreted within the Black Atlantic. The book aims to show how artists and intellectuals in the Black Atlantic have excavated the classical texts, images, narratives and practices in order to imagine new possibilities. The essays emphasize the outcomes of slavery's aftermaths by way of various geographical (dis)location and cultural connections.

The volume is divided into three parts: 1) Wakes, 2) Journeys and 3) Tales. The editors grace the book with a programmatic Introduction in which they lay out the aims and contours of the project. Paul Gilroy's famous work on the Black Atlantic provides the broad conceptual framework for these analyses of the reception of the classics in the diasporic world.

Part I – Wakes

The first chapter is by Emily Greenwood, "Middle Passages: Mediating Classics and Radical Philology in Marlene NourbeSe Philip and Derek Walcott." This chapter explores the use of classical texts and figures as mediating elements in the historical and representational space the Middle Passage plays in the work of Marlene NourbeSe Philip and Derek Walcott. The Middle Passage remains a site of memory or, as the author identifies it, "a zone of translation based on the physical transportation and translation of bodies" (31). Both NourbeSe and Walcott use classical texts as tools of resistance and radical rewriting. Greenwood shows how the notion of critical memory is used in a creative way in Walcott's works, pointing out his recurring evocation of bones as poetic touchstone. NourbeSe's

goal, Greenwood highlights, is to dismember the Classics, that is, to challenge certain Eurocentric readings of the classical texts and to make them serve her own purpose of remembering the fate and the story of her Black ancestors. Playing with languages and with texts, she engages in reading the classical texts, such as the *Aeneid*, subversively: "While Philip may not find common cause with Derek Walcott, both poets are engaged in a profound philological project because they ceaselessly address the question of how to love a conflicted language that bears the traces of a colonial history, as well as the question of how to express Caribbean experience within this language" (54).

The second chapter in this section of the book, "Nero, the mustard!: The Ironies of Classical Slave Names in the British Caribbean," was authored by Margaret Williamson. The author demonstrates how slaveholders took names (place names, literary and classical names) from a wide classical stock of names and imposed them on to the Black slaves. The point was to ridicule the slaves, and to differentiate "slaves as a group from free whites by means of nomenclature and to assert the primacy of European culture" (63). Williamson also shows how this naming of slaves participated in the overall violence exercised against the slave's body and psyche. The classical names were also used for animals (domestic pets and working animals), thus obliterating in the minds of the slaveholders the difference between slaves and animals. As the author states, "Those who named their slaves Homer, Virgil, Pindar or Sappho were not offering any commentary on those individuals' poetic prowess. Rather, they were boasting of their own fluency in the language of power" (78).

The third chapter is a fascinating contribution by Dan-el Padilla Peralta, "Athens and Sparta of the New World: The Classical Passions of Santo Domingo." He shows how classical tropes, figures and myths have been at the core of Santo Domingo's claims to racial purity and ethnic identity throughout its history. This particular way of presenting the DR, as the Athens of the New World, is placed within a clear racialized anti-Haitianism propagated by the Dominican Republic's dominant classes. This racist attitude, or this deep-seated desire to be seen by others as a white nation, is "a means of reproducing and sustaining forms of political control" (81). According to Padilla Peralta, this symbolic positioning of Santo Domingo as heir to the classical world has allowed the Dominican Republic to exercise structural violence not only against people of Haitian descent living in the DR, but also to weaponize Greco-Roman antiquity against marginalized black and brown bodies who are *bona fide* Dominicans.

Part II- Journeys

Michele Valerie Ronnick begins the second part of the volume with a stimulating chapter on the life of a black classicist who should be better known, "In Search of Henry Alexander Hartley, Black Classicist, Clergyman, and Physician." In this chapter, Ronnick endeavors to show how a focus on Dr. Harley's life may help us understand the quintessential place classical knowledge occupied throughout the Black Atlantic. Hartley's life was one of movement, both geographical and occupational. From the Caribbean (Trinidad), he moved to Canada, from maritime Canada he went down south to the United States and back to Canada (Nova Scotia and Quebec) and then Paris to finally settle and die in Port of Spain, Trinidad, serving as "the poor man's doctor." Throughout his journeys, he was a deacon, pastor, teacher, classical scholar and medical doctor, who was always ready to help his fellow human beings by various means in his numerous capacities. As Ronnick states, "Hartley was a restless, ambitious, fearless, outspoken, self-confident, and self-promoting fellow" (131). For his pioneering contribution in so many different and interesting ways, especially his contributions "to the history of black classicism in the western hemisphere" (132), his life deserves to be celebrated.

Heidi Morse's chapter, "Roman Studios: The Black Woman Artist in the Eternal City, from Edmonia Lewis to Carrie Mae Weems," is difficult to situate within the overall context of the volume. Its thesis is not clear and its particular relevance or contribution is not readily apparent. The author's declared intention is to trace "resonances between two parallel transatlantic journeys of African American women artists to Rome and their on-the-ground confrontations of white, male-dominated narratives of Western art history" (Introduction, 16).

Morse's text is followed by a chapter by Kimathi Donkor, "Africana Andromeda: Contemporary Painting and the Classical Black Figure." The aim of this chapter is to approach the classical world from the artistic lens of a painter immersed in studio practice. What comes from that experimentation is a beautiful and complex tapestry of how images and myths from the classical world can be represented anew and linked to certain African identity. The author shows how the artistic experiment of reimagining, for example, the myth of Andromeda in modern artwork may help to articulate a novel expression of the ancient myth.

Part III – Tales

Adam Lecznar presents a fine analysis in his chapter, “The Tragedy of Aimé Césaire.” The essay explores the genre of tragedy and shows how its central tenets may be restructured in the context of the Black Atlantic. Césaire’s work, especially his dramatic representation of Henri Christophe, points to the importance of understanding the tragic and the multilayered pasts.

Chapter 8, “Bernadine Evaristo’s *The Emperor’s Babe: An Account of Roman London from the Black British Perspective*,” is by Tracey L. Waters. The author demonstrates how an understanding of the past is linked to the present. By unlearning and problematizing certain presentations of histories accepted as truth, and by highlighting a much more complex and over encompassing past, one might then understand the past differently. This understanding and acknowledgement of a multi-layered past, where the achievements and contributions of non-European figures are also celebrated, allows the author to rewrite, to reimagine and to envision a different present and future.

“Myth and the Fantastic in the Work of Junot Díaz,” by Justine McConnell is the penultimate chapter. Its aim is to explore how Díaz has been able to fuse the speculative and the classical in some of his work. Díaz’s work is directly influenced by classical epic, but he plays with them to articulate specific themes and tropes. The quest for home, dispersion from home and expansion from home to different spaces in the world are important areas of exploration in Díaz’s oeuvre. Justine McConnell shows how the fantastical and the real, fiction and memoir, and the creation of the positive from the ashes of destruction make Díaz’s work a key illustration of Gilroy’s concept of the Black Atlantic in action.

Patrice D. Rankine’s chapter, “Classics for All? Liberal Education and the Matter of Black Lives” concludes this excellent collection. Rankine is brutally honest in his assessment of liberal education and the place of classics within the curriculum. For Rankine, there is a contradiction between the modern project of classics for all and the parameters of class, race and access. He also analyzes what the academic discipline of classics has meant and continues to mean “in the hands of expert, gifted Black Atlantic descendants” (269). The Black Atlantic practitioners have shown the limits and the possibilities of the classics by adapting and altering the classical texts, myths, images and figures to address important and pressing issues in the present. The questions raised in the chapter are pertinent, especially when one considers how classics is “a field noted for its perceived elitism and

racial exclusiveness” (288). Rankine shows that in spite of all the difficulties associated with the discourse of classics for all, “in the hands of Black Atlantic authors, the classics undergo ethical, conceptual, and symbolic shifts that engage the state of play for Black Atlantic citizens and others” (289).

This volume is a powerful collection of engaging texts on a field of study whose reigning paradigm has only recently come under the critical scrutiny of Black scholars. It deserves to be read and discussed widely. Still, a few reservations are in order. The dense introductory chapter could have benefited from a better editorial hand. Some of the sentences are too long and thus prevent clearer prose. Two chapters in particular (Chapter 2 by Williamson and 5 by Morse) could have had clearer thesis statements. The last chapter refers to a quote by Cornel West (272, 276), but this mysterious quote is nowhere to be found. Other than these few remarks, this book is a welcome addition to the needed conversation around classicisms in the Black Atlantic.

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