

“Black Classicism”: The African American Reception of the Classical Tradition in the Writings of Reginald Shepherd

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ABSTRACT

Classical reception studies have developed into a vibrant field of research. Over the last decade, a new paradigm has evolved that studies often conflicting and heterogeneous receptions of classical literature in African American and Caribbean contexts. What is now commonly referred to as “black classicism” is, against this background, both a socio-political phenomenon and a cultural theory. In my essay, I want to focus on one author who has commented on “black classicism” in a theoretical as well as poetical way: Reginald Shepherd’s writings repeatedly draw on the classical canon, re-situating it in an African American context and re-reading its contents from the perspective of an outsider in order to undermine racial essentialisms. However, they do not function exclusively as counterdiscourses, but can rather be seen as an imaginative framework for thinking about the cultural fabrics of *classicisms* and the liberating potential they entail. This essay, then, discusses the cultural-historical and theoretical implications of Shepherd’s work against a review of his variant of “black classicism” before moving on to explore the transnational and transcultural imagination it inspires.

The classical tradition has figured prominently in the American imagination since the first colonies were established in the “New World.” As Caroline Winterer writes, “From the time of the first European settlements in Virginia and Massachusetts [...] reverence for ancient models helped to structure ethical, political, oratorical, artistic and educational ideals” (*Culture* 1). The Roman Empire functioned as a cultural foil against which European imperial powers modeled their colonial exploits and undertakings. State servants and clergymen were trained in classical languages and soon historical exempla were extrapolated from classical texts in order to justify independence and the republican ideals of the Founding Fathers. During the nineteenth century, “classicism” became a “central intellectual project” and was established as a liberal arts discipline (1). Although college-trained humanists propagated the universalism of the classical canon, it was far from being an all-inclusive or homogeneous area of knowledge (*Culture* 2). Rather, classical studies were predominantly an elitist undertaking and interpretations and instrumentalizations of its contents varied widely, as arguments were used by proslavery Southerners as well as abolitionists. Although classical references saw a decline during the postbellum period, Americans were still surrounded by classical allusions and imagery in popular culture as well as by classical architecture, like New York’s Old Penn Station. “The White City” that was built for the Chicago World Exhibition in 1893 was modeled on classical examples and embodied the imperial aspirations of an emergent world power. Although classical refer-

ences figured less prominently in the political imaginary of the twentieth century, allusions to classical myths continued to play an important role for imaginative world-making in literature and Tinseltown histotainment.

This history of classical reception in the United States is, of course, oversimplified. As Meyer Reinhold points out, “[T]he classical tradition in America was multifarious and multivalent, responding to sectarian, sectional, political, social pluralism, as well as varying in the lives of individual Americans” (18). Nevertheless, my overview draws on a few key aspects that have also figured as central objects of inquiry in the now booming field of classical reception studies. In this context, Reinhold’s research still stands as a major point of reference for scholars who examine the role of Greek and Roman traditions in the American experience. Until Reinhold’s study, the influence of classicism in American cultural history had been undervalued by Americanists as well as classicists. While the former now increasingly attempt to critically undermine narratives of American exceptionalism by situating American history in transnational and transhistorical frameworks of cultural contact and influence, the latter aim for more access and relevance and try to open up their field to approaches that focus on the transformations that the classical tradition has undergone in cultural history. Recent publications have dealt with the reception of the classical tradition in American history and culture.¹ These studies all point out the ways in which the classics were often instrumentalized and appropriated as “a conservative, civilizing force” (Roynon 14). Still, they do not always avoid the pitfalls of presupposing “one essential American self,” giving way to a “universalizing conception of Americanness” and thereby underestimate the subversive force that classical receptions could entail (10-11).

The latter aspect has gained increasing attention in scholarly debates, in which the reception of the classics by African American authors has evolved into a paradigm of its own, often subsumed under the label “black classicism.” Looking at how African American authors have used the classical canon to comment on, subvert, and undermine dominant cultural models of identity, this strand of scholarship is concerned with uncovering the imaginative and social fabrics of classical receptions within a framework removed from the Mediterranean. While it can reference a plethora of examples of black variants of classicism, starting with Phillis Wheatley in the eighteenth century (Cook/Tatum 1-2), this paradigm has drawn on more recent developments in postcolonial theory as well as transcultural models of hybridity and mobility to explore how and to what extent the classics circulated within sociocultural frameworks removed from the white-marbled ideal of classicism constructed in early modern Europe (Greenwood, “Re-rooting” 87-88). And although these explorations have helped emancipate the classical tradition from a hegemonic European (or white) context, they have often replicated racial essentialisms. Moreover, there has been a tendency to build up a canon of widely

¹ For instance, the historian Margaret Malamud has illustrated the role of references to ancient Rome in modern America (2008), the cultural historian Caroline Winterer has looked at the “Culture of Classicism” and its variants in U.S. society (2002) and the literary critic John Shields has analyzed the implications of the ancient tradition—especially the myth of Aeneas—in the formation of a national mythology (2001).

recognized authors like Derek Walcott, Toni Morrison, Ralph Ellison or Rita Dove, who have made extensive use of classical references in their writings, while neglecting other voices in an intertextual debate which is more heterogeneous and polyvalent than many would like to admit. In my essay, I want to focus on one author who has commented on “black classicism” in a theoretical as well as poetical sense: Reginald Shepherd has frequently problematized notions of race, gender, and exclusionary truth claims in his writings (Schliephake, “Classicism” 193-96). As I want to show in the course of my essay, Shepherd’s works repeatedly draw on the classical canon, re-situating it in an African American context and re-reading its contents from the perspective of an outsider to undermine essentialisms. However, it does not function as a counterdiscourse alone, but can rather be seen as an imaginative framework for thinking about the cultural fabrics of *classicisms* and the liberating potential they entail. Firstly, I will discuss the cultural-historic and theoretical implications of Shepherd’s work against a discussion of his variant of black classicism. In the second part, I will shift the focus to the transnational and transcultural imagination that it inspires.

Reginald Shepherd’s “Black Classicism”

Over the last decade, the idea of a uniform reception of antiquity and a hegemonic conception of a classical “canon” has become increasingly fragmented in favor of complexity and heterogeneity. In the course of postcolonial studies and the “transnational turn” in American studies, the idea of an essential American self no longer truly holds; the same can be said about the cultural authority of the classics, which are no longer solely associated with elitist learning and a Eurocentric, racialized framework of cultural dominance or superiority. Rather, they are now seen as cultural texts that do not miraculously stand outside of historical processes, but that “may be put to work in the service of various projects” in a counter-discursive way so that they are constantly transformed themselves and re-read in different contexts (Goff, Introduction 14). One strand of scholarship that has decisively contributed to this change is the study of the role that the classical tradition has played for African Americans and how it was used as a “counterdiscourse that writes back to racism and imperialism, or as a source of mythopoiesis in the formation of modern black identity” (Greenwood, “Tale” 281-82).

Now commonly referred to as “black classicism,” this strand of research can be said to be a theory as well as a practice.² In scholarly discourse, it has been a “disparate field of research,” often overwrought with polemics and politics (Greenwood, “Re-rooting” 88). Variants that have attempted to render the classical canon as

² One interesting thing to note is that classicists formulated almost all initial studies and pre-eminent theoretical explorations about black classicism. Leading figures in the field like Lorna Hardwick, Barbara Goff, Emily Greenwood, Michele Valerie Ronnick, or Patrice Rankine are all classical scholars by training who have turned their attentions to the study of contemporary culture. This might have to do with the fact that classicists are increasingly faced—like many disciplines in the humanities—with questions of access and relevance, aspiring to illustrate the unbroken influence of the classical tradition on our world and its continuity throughout cultural history.

a tradition that had been hijacked by the Greeks and later the Europeans from its African origins can be found since the Harlem Renaissance and have been articulated in studies that range from George G.M. James's *The Stolen Legacy* (1954) to Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* (1987–2006).³ Key figures in the African American struggle for emancipation and political agency like Marcus Garvey or, most prominently, W.E.B. DuBois extensively dealt with the classics in their own writings, using them as an intellectual source of resistance (Barnard 369). Next to them, black academics like William Sanders Scarborough devoted themselves to the study of antiquity and stood at the beginning of a long history of black classical scholarship that has been referred to, pertaining to Meyer Reinhold's work, as "Classica Africana" by Michele Valerie Ronnick (xxiii–xlvi). Even in the context of scholarly discourse, the classics took on the role of an emancipatory cultural authority whose mastery could rebuke claims that blacks were intellectually inferior.⁴ Considering classics as an element of "human qualification" and as "the basis for civilization and humanity" cannot obscure the fact that the discourses surrounding the classical canon had been exceedingly marked by prejudice and a "perceived whiteness" (Greenwood, "Re-rooting" 91, 93). A study like Frank Snowden's *Blacks in Antiquity* (1970), which claims that the ancients understood race but did not know racial prejudice (Snowden 1–5), has to be read against this backdrop. The mistrust regarding the classics from the viewpoint of many black intellectuals also attests to the "deep schism in the term black classicism" (Greenwood, "Re-rooting" 91). As Walters puts it in this context: "[S]ome African Americanists dismiss the Western classics as Eurocentric and antithetical to a Black literary tradition—or Black aesthetic" (Walters 5). Recent studies in the field, like Walters's own work, point in another direction entirely, however, and illustrate the importance that references to the classics have had for African American poets and writers since the American Revolution. Consequently, "black classicism antedates and transcends the academic discipline of Classical Studies" (Rankine 25).

Although "black classicism" can, in many ways, be read as a critique of essentializing notions of culture or race, there is nevertheless the danger that the term

³ Originally planned as a tetralogy, *Black Athena* undertook the project of undermining the traditional view of the classics as a Eurocentric culture possession of the "West." Through meticulous historical research, comparative approaches, and linguistic evidence, the sinologist and political scientist Martin Bernal argued that the roots of the classical—and thus of Western—civilizations lay outside of Europe, namely in Asia and especially in Africa. By examining the historiography of the nineteenth century, Bernal showed how a so-called "Aryan" model developed that propagated the development of classical Greek culture as the result of the invasion from the north by Indo-Europeans or "Hellenes". He pits this "scheme" against the "Ancient" model which held that Greek culture had, to a large degree, been influenced or even imported from Phoenicia and especially Egypt (Bernal 2–3). For a good overview of the debate surrounding *Black Athena* and the controversy it raised see van Binsbergen, also Orrells, Bhambra, and Royon.

⁴ Hairston has shown how the American ideas and ideals of citizenship and civil virtue were fostered by classicism and how African Americans could adhere to the classics in order "to defend their identity as humans" (11) and "rejected the traditional understanding of the classics as the exclusive foundation and cultural property of white European civilization" (12). On the role of classics for African American women see Walters, *Mirror*.

itself replicates the idea of a distinctly “black” classicism different from a “white” variant. For Reginald Shepherd, who grew up as the only child of a single mother in a ghetto tenement in the Bronx, the one-sided claims of an interpretational sovereignty over the classics and an exclusive cultural heritage were fictions in themselves.⁵ To him, the white-marbled world of the classics was as much a hegemonic cultural projection as the exclusion of Blacks from a participation in it. In consequence, he used the de-pragmatized medium of poetic speech and literary world-making as an imaginative space for confronting classical receptions with a black experience and for reflecting on the porosity and instability of cultural identity formations. As he illustrated in his semi-autobiographical essay collection *Orpheus in the Bronx*, published shortly before his death in 2008, his standpoint was very much influenced by his own upbringing and childhood fascination with ancient classical myths:

Greek mythology [...] represented an elsewhere and an otherwise to my uninterestingly unhappy life, a realm where ordinary misery was ennobled, where things need not be pleasant but they mattered. [...] In that world of suffering and death were made beautiful and important: mundane experience underwent a sea change into something rich and strange. (Shepherd, *Orpheus* 14)

In his autobiographic writings, Shepherd repeatedly relates the estrangement, social marginalization, and discrimination he was confronted with, first as an orphaned boy from an African American ghetto, and later as a homosexual who was HIV-positive, to the worlds of Greek myth. He used this world as a contrastive foil to his own existence, and his reading of compilations of mythology and historical novels became an imaginative escape from surroundings he perceived as oppressive (12-15 and 44). However, it would be wrong to limit his interpretation of Greek mythology to his understanding of it as an amoral universe “of pure existence” (14). Rather, it also turned into a way of perceiving the social frameworks of racial segregation and discrimination through an alternative lens, which would later allow him to identify with the marginalized and downtrodden experiences of imagined classical heroes. As Shepherd puts it, “[T]hose myths’ world of power and beauty and force corresponded [...] to my sense of a world ruled by arbitrary powers” (*Orpheus* 14). On a poetic and aesthetic level, this did not coincide with an idealization of ghetto life, however. On the contrary, it opened up an imaginative space for exploring the experiential and cultural frameworks of his life and for dissecting their forces that could either be oppressive or liberating. What he took to be universal traits of human existence—feelings of despair and hope, loneliness and love—could be transferred from one sociocultural (or historical) context to another one. And those feelings could be valorized and made meaningful through artistic expression, which became for him a way out of the impoverished tenements of his early childhood. The title of his book, *Orpheus in the Bronx*, can be seen as an expression of this conviction, as it conflates the archaic tradition of poetic world-making with the social setting of an American ghetto. Both are culturally coded: whereas Orpheus has long figured as a cultural icon connected to music and especially opera, the Bronx is often associated with

⁵ On Shepherd cf. Archambeau; Philen.

social issues of misguided housing politics, economic disadvantage, and violent crime. Shepherd's own fascination with Orpheus as a symbol for poetry can be seen in the fact that he often came back to this figure and used him as an alter ego. By modeling himself, a black, homosexual, and HIV-positive man, in the guise of a modern-day Orpheus, he not only inverts connotations usually associated with this emblematic persona (white, heterosexual, everlasting), but ascribes to himself the role of a mediator who merges seemingly opposite cultural spheres and contexts. To him, this is not only a question of content, but also of stylistic aspects:

The world of Greek myth is very plastic and capacious, able to take all kinds of things, but at the same time it has great formal elegance, and that became a goal for my poetry: to have that elasticity and amplitude of emotional and intellectual range but at the same time to remain shapely, to contain that force within form. I was and am drawn to myth's simultaneous presence of glory and catastrophe, the way that overwhelming chaos coexist. Greek mythology played the role for me that it played for the Greeks, as a means to channel, order, and give shape to feelings and forces that would otherwise be completely overwhelming. (*Orpheus* 14)

Shepherd's "black classicism" is, against this backdrop, to be understood not solely as an intertextual practice or a play with cultural signifiers, but as an aesthetic exploration of language's power to transcend the narrow confines of social segregation. In this way, he refers to the traditional use of poetry as a cultural mode of creative possibility as well as stylistic order. Shepherd thus inscribes himself into a transhistorical and transcultural framework that the Western tradition has incorporated from the ancient Greeks. Yet, he is aware of the fact that what he is confronted with are hegemonic ideals of humanist thinking that had, for centuries, worked along the lines of class-consciousness and racism.⁶ In one of his essays, he equates his fascination and use of myth to "clothing that doesn't fit properly" (*Orpheus* 138). And he continues, "Western high culture [...] is in my possession, but does not belong to me: we are simultaneously wholly part of and utterly other to one another. My language is both my most intimate possession and not mine at all, and that is a space of creation as well as alienation" (138). This is an adequate description of the specific mode of Shepherd's "black classicism." Where theorists of the paradigm tend to overtly emphasize the emancipatory quality of classical receptions by authors who had, due to their own cultural heritage or skin color, been excluded from it for a long time,⁷ Shepherd is careful

⁶ This is a recurring concern in studies dealing with "black classicism." As Norrell London has shown, the "colonial imagination" was, to a great degree, "generated and mediated" through "education" and its "curriculum [...]" as a means of establishing for the 'other' a world view and a concept of self and community" (London 96). Classical texts formed a benchmark of curriculum, in both the "new" world and the "old" and the construction of a cultural "superiority" on the part of the colonizers was often done on the interpretational sovereignty over the Latin and Ancient Greek texts (Goff, *Language* 1-8). Emily Greenwood in particular has explored how the colonial transmission of the European colonizing powers functioned in the historical context of the Caribbean and how it was later appropriated, transformed, and undermined by English-speaking authors like Derek Walcott (Greenwood, *Afro-Greeks* 31-55).

⁷ An example is Lorna Hardwick, who emphatically emphasizes the emancipatory effect of "black classicism." According to her, the use of "ancient texts and cultures" are de-centred from what used to be thought of as their dominant Western, cultural, social and political associations"

not to overestimate its sociocultural impact. Intertextuality is a trademark of literary world-making per se and this “cultural mobility” does not necessarily coincide with social mobility or equality (Greenblatt 5-10). Thus, his classicism functions more on a formal and linguistic level than on a thematic one. This is not to deny the interplay between social context and literary world-making, but rather cautions us not to jump to conclusions when African American or Caribbean authors incorporate the classics into their own work. As Shepherd makes clear over and over again in his theoretical writings, this move is at once connected to the poetic involvement with a literary tradition as well as to a critical reflection on its meanings and the limits of understanding. In consequence, Shepherd is both the author of his poems and a dedicated reader, dissecting and re-negotiating the cultural premises and frameworks on which this tradition rests. By emphasizing the role of language as the central negotiator in this exchange, he puts the focus on the ambiguity and fluidity of cultural meanings. The de-pragmatized medium of poetic speech therefore “embodies [...] possibilities rather than constraint” for Shepherd (*Orpheus* 41). Because poetry de-familiarizes conventions of speech and uncovers multi-layered levels of meaning, it is the central medium to explore what he refers to as “otherness” (41). His variant of “black classicism” expresses “otherness” as African American re-articulations of Western mythological figures.

Many mythological embodiments of heroic masculinity can be found in his poems: Achilles, Telemachus, Orpheus and others re-appear in many of his texts to subvert and undermine the cultural norms usually connected to them. In his poems, they appear as homeless beggars, drug addicts, or homosexuals, inhabiting the marginalized spaces of modern America. This can, for instance, be seen in his 2007 collection *Fata Morgana (FM)*. It opens with a poem entitled “Orpheus Plays the Bronx.” A deeply personal meditation on a traumatic incident in the life of the speaker, it merges the fantasy world of myth and the oppressive world of childhood isolation and drug abuse.⁸ The opening line, “When I was ten [...] / [...] my mother, / tried to kill herself,” introduces the main subject of the poem in which the speaker remembers a suicide attempt by his mother (Shepherd, *FM* 6). The lyric sequence is marked by a matter-of-fact tone that can be seen as a distancing strategy at the time of remembering as well as a duplication of how the younger self of the speaker saw the situation: While the mother lay in bed “all weekend,” drunk with gin and surrounded by “Tanqueray bottles” that “halo the bed,” her child watched the scene with only a book of myths to keep him/her company: “In the myth book’s color/illustration, the poet turns around/inside the mouth of hell to look at her/losing him” (Shepherd, *FM* 6). The colorful picture in what appears to be a collection of ancient mythical stories (supposedly for children) finds its verbal expression within the poem: blue,

and “liberated for reinterpretation [...] released from oppressive constructions and exploitation and freed to assume new identities which are not limited by the dictates, values and material culture of colonial appropriators.” In other words, they become a “source of resistance and liberation” against hegemonic imperial frameworks that had used the classics as an instrument of intellectual superiority and socio-political “suppression” (Hardwick 109).

⁸ The poem could be autobiographical in content, since it is in line with many aspects that Shepherd has referred to in his autobiographical essay discussed above.

red, yellow, purple, black, and white are all featured in it, while the names of the singers Al Green and Barry White, whose songs underline the scene, also evoke the impression of color. Of course, both had been African American singers and the setting, which is only named in the title of the poem, is that of a black ghetto. "Color," in every sense of the term, matters in this world and even "death" tries to "get some color to fill out/ his skin." The dichotomy between the "bony white boy" and the "colored" community of the Bronx points to the "color line" that had dominated the political climate and racial rhetoric of American policy well into the second half of the twentieth century.⁹ While this is the social backdrop to the action of the poem, its mythological undercurrent is brought about both by the intermedial evocation of the illustration of the Orpheus myth as well as by the equation of its contents with what the lyrical "I" sees: "Some say/ she stepped on an asp, a handful of pills/ littered the floor." The story of the Greek myth (the multiple, unnamed speakers may invoke different versions of it) with Eurydice being bitten by a snake finds its equivalent in the pills that the mother spills on the floor. The world of myth and that of a Bronx tenement are brought together, intersect and comment on one another. The death-in-life motif that characterizes them is both evoked as well as transcended in poetic speech. Not only does the title of the poem designate the scene as a form of "play," as a kind of conjuring trick, which invokes a child's play, it also points, on a meta-level, to the poet himself, "who turns around," looking at a past moment. The self-referential variation of the Orpheus myth, then, is one way of characterizing the poetic world-making, as well as of making meaning of a traumatic incident, whose full complexity is only revealed at the end: "The pictures don't prove/anything, but one thing I remember/about the myth's still true:/the man can't live if she does. She survived to die for good." The memory of the speaker and the contents of the myth are both questioned in their stability, and their meaning is only disclosed with regard to a present that is marked by absence. The fact that the last two verses are the only end-stopped lines in a poem that is otherwise characterized by its use of enjambements is an indicator that a kind of closure has been reached and that the lyrical "I" accepts the fate of his/her mother.

The poem is a good example for the way Shepherd's writings problematize notions of race and embed references to the ancient tradition in settings where aesthetic pleasure is noticeably absent. The child may be fascinated by the mythological book, yet the dire reality of everyday life confronts him/her with images that are hard to cope with. More than an escape from reality, the mythological prism is therefore also used as an interpretative framework for dealing with a situation that would otherwise be hard to accept. This does not coincide with an idealization of this world, however. Rather, Shepherd uses the classical references as a way of confronting the abject reality of social marginalization with an imaginative counter-world steeped in rich cultural symbols and metaphors. The effect is to valorize the experience of ghetto life on an aesthetic level and to use language in order to de-familiarize the contexts of Greek myth. This juxtaposition of dif-

⁹ For a discussion of the "color line" and its significance for Shepherd's poetry, cf. also Reed, 141-42.

ferent cultural registers and their subsequent merging can be seen as an aesthetic strategy of “black classicism” in general. On the level of reception, this leads to a surprise effect, since it undermines cultural notions usually connected to these spheres and shows in what way culture is itself mobile and hybrid. In the terms of Shepherd, it is a “way of opening up worlds and possibilities of worlds. It offers [...] the possibility to find the otherness in the familiar, to find the familiar in the other” (*Orpheus* 41–42). This is also the reason why the label “black classicism” would have, presumably, not sat well with Shepherd, who perceived poetry as a space of possibility and not “as a means to assert or claim social identity” (41). His own classicism is neither always “black” in that it does not solely focus on African American characters, nor does it reproduce heroisms often found in classical sources and their cultural receptions. It creates imaginative spaces for the reflection on identity categories and explorations of possibilities, a process which both looks back on a long tradition of poetic world-making as well as invites the creation of new images (42–45). In making the self a dynamic rather than a static entity, it also invites transcultural and transhistorical interpretations on identity—an aspect that will be discussed in the subsequent part of the essay.

The Transcultural and Transnational Imagination of Reginald Shepherd

The transcultural and transnational take on classical reception is one of the defining characteristics of “black classicism.” As Page duBois argues, this has to do with a re-conceptualization of the term “classical,” along with an increasing tendency “to develop the notion of ‘other spaces’, of extension, geographical and temporal, of the classical, beyond the confinement of the classical to Europe” (duBois 7). This entails a challenge to “the limitations of a Western perspective that sees the Greeks as autonomous and isolated from the Near East, Africa, and India, a perspective now eroded by our situation within globalization, which opens up new possibilities of contact, hybridity, nomadism, transgression, and travelling in general” (15). As Michelle Warren observes, “the classical” does not “[belong] to any single time or place” rather it has repeatedly re-surfaced in history as a transhistorical and, in the end, transnational force, supporting or challenging hegemonic discourses (285). For although there can be no question that “the classics [...] also condition empire,” it is also true that they have become implicated in complex cultural processes of transfer and discourses that often move along the lines of binaries or dualisms like ancient/modern, civilized/savage, culture/nature, etc. (284). In a long history of the *translatio imperii*, the classics have supported claims of hegemonic rule; yet they have also presented alternative models to socio-cultural developments and structures. Rather than being equivalent to modern states or nations, the classics are at once part of historical processes and stand outside of them, since they are removed from their respective acts of reception in a temporal as well as spatial sense. There is thus an increased tendency to detach the “classical” from Europe or the “West” and to perceive the classics in their own alterity. They literally are of another time and place and while they cannot be appropriated neatly by any preceding cultural system, they can never-

theless be transformed and re-created in ever-new contexts of reception (Schliephake, “Blendung” 30-31).

The hybrid identities that emerge from these processes of cultural transfer are therefore to be seen both as culturally productive as well as contradictory and possibly conflict-laden. It is against this background that “black classicism” can itself be seen as a kind of post-colonial hybridization¹⁰—an aspect that sits uneasy with some of the scholars working in this field. Tessa Roynon, for example, argues that “these categories, qualified by descriptors of colour and provenance, ultimately reinforce the notion of a pre-existing ‘classicism’ that is (somehow and nonsensically) at once universal, European, and white” (184). Accordingly, the identity-centered theoretical conceptualizations of black classicism are enhanced by transnational perspectives, which “suggest that [...] the idea that ‘classicism’ unqualified implies a white, European tradition is the ultimate fabrication beyond which we must move” (Roynon 184). In her writings on the works of Toni Morrison, Roynon has herself made use of a transnational framework by illustrating that “the author is part of a tradition of diasporic classically-allusive writing, but also in emphasizing that the classical tradition itself is, by definition, diasporic” (7). The “pre-national” quality of the classical canon allows an author like Morrison “to transcend processes of categorization” (8). Rankine, too, aspires “to complicate the idea of a monolith of ‘the classics’ by pointing to the diversity of approaches to classicism” and to overcome models that conceptualize linear and mono-causal lines of tradition since antiquity (Rankine 67). Underlining the “breaks” and “ruptures” in this tradition has, indeed, become one of the main goals of “black classicism” (67). By so doing, Black classicism has also allowed for a reflection on how cultural processes of transfer and transmission work. Black Classicism has also underlined how modes of cultural contact or hybridization are automatically implied when the classics are taken up in contemporary discourses or cultural works. They have become recognized in their own alterity and strangeness, as the practice of dealing with the classical tradition is itself seen as a kind of training ground for handling socio-political issues of “otherness” in a globalized age. And although these concepts are all in danger of over-evaluating or over-emphasizing the emancipatory quality of non-hegemonic classical receptions, their transcultural and transnational perspective is nevertheless to be welcomed for its far-reaching ethical implications and for breaking up one-sided world views by re-modifying the cultural premises upon which they rest.

In his 2003 volume of verse, *Otherhood*, Reginald Shepherd repeatedly addresses these issues of identity politics. *Otherhood* is self-conscious about the social categories of color, race, and sexuality. The forty-two free-verse poems repeatedly deal with them as realities that are hard to overcome in daily life. Yet they also use their linguistic frameworks as tropes that can be re-written and undermined in poetic language. As Reed has shown, Shepherd uses the images of two gods—a god of fire associated with blackness and a god of sea and winter

¹⁰ This hybridization functions as a guiding trope in many of “black classicism’s” finest theoretical explorations like Greenwood’s *Afro-Greeks* or Goff’s and Simpson’s *Crossroads in the Black Aegean*.

associated with whiteness—to illustrate the dichotomies and binary oppositions that characterize identity formations. And although the poems in *Otherhood* "[establish] a powerfully, if violently, homoerotic binary between racially marked figures, it also deconstructs that vision" (Reed 140). In the poem "Homology," for instance, the Greek god "Apollo is black, wolf to/to the moon, Sol burnt/to cinders in my blind eye/(black stones sears sky, white/shadow covers day)" (Shepherd, *Otherhood* 49). The poem goes on to paratactically fuse opposites with one another in a series of oxymora. The title not only invokes a formal equivalent between relations and structures but can also be seen as a play on the notion of homoerotic love(-making), which is explicitly dealt with in the second half of the poem. There is a constant interplay between attraction and repulsion and the struggle between light and darkness ends in a twilight shadow, where neither sun nor moon can claim dominance. Poetry here becomes the means of creating a hybrid space, in which ancient mythological figures like Apollo or Eros are fused with the images of (homoerotic) lovemaking in urban park areas ("Eros / goes shaking the bushes / for sex"), and where the issue of appearance is tested against things that are concealed or hidden ("Sun's / heat consumes moon, / but there is water / under earth") (Shepherd, *Otherhood* 49-50). The lyric thus problematizes cultural divisions and categorizations in light of how things appear, uncovering the hidden layers of meaning and being that cannot be subsumed under any neat label.

What Reed concludes from a close reading of other poems in *Otherhood* can be said for Shepherd's work as a whole, namely that it "dramatizes for us the way in which a subject does not possess an identity but instead identifies, vainly, with a series of inadequate, unstable simulacra ('dark' things that, if possessed once and for all, would give an essential content to 'being black')" (Reed 144). And although "the social circulation of racialized and racist fantasies has occurred and will continue to occur in and through the speaking subject, regardless of conscious individual intent" (144), there is also the feeling that this discursive circle can be broken up by imaginative world making. As Shepherd himself has put it in his introduction to *Lyric Postmodernisms*, his poetry—like that of many of his contemporaries—is "engaged in exploring and interrogating the relations of conception and perception, with how mind both makes its way through a world not of its own making and how mind makes a world of its own out of the world it is given" (Shepherd, Introduction xii). More than a question of phenomenology, this is a deeply ethical undertaking, since it is concerned both with an "exploration of subjectivity" as well as with a questioning of the categories "of culture and history," including a "skepticism toward grand narratives and the possibility of final answers or explanations, toward selfhood as a stable reference point, and toward language as a means by which to know the self or the world" (xi-xii). The intertextual integration of and the lyric engagement with the classical canon can thereby be seen as an integral part of this poetic and aesthetic program, as a way of de-familiarizing canonized motifs and as a "return to (plural) origins." While Shepherd was very much aware of tradition and used explicit intertextual references in his poetic work, he can nevertheless be characterized as an "American hybrid" poet. As Cole Swensen puts it, these "poems often honor the avant-garde mandate to renew the forms and expand the boundaries of poetry, thereby increasing the expressive potential of language

itself while also remaining committed to the emotional spectra of lived experience" (xxi). This hybrid aesthetic "reconsider[s] the ethics of language, on the one hand, and redraft[s] our notions of a whole, on the other" (xvi).

This can, in fact, be read as an appropriate characterization of Shepherd's poetry in general and of his classicism in particular. His poem "In the City of Elagabal" (*Otherhood* 18-23) is a long meditation on death and re-birth; it creates its own mythical system against the motif of the cult of the sun god Elagabal, brought to Rome during imperial times, and the invoked geography of the ancient Eastern Mediterranean world. It is almost entirely composed of fragments and quotes taken from such diverse sources as the King James Bible, Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* as well as other books on ancient history and myth. In Archambeau's words, this poem in particular creates a "synthetic mythology" as it "combines elements of the dying and reborn god [...] with a suggestion of gender transgression [...]. One element of Shepherd's richly evocative myth is the transcending of individuality" (Archambeau 168). The latter aspect both refers to the lyric contents of the poem as well as to its free composition of various sources. The ancient myth is re-assembled from modern fragments and interpretations, which not only point to the instability of historical sense making, but also question the status of poetry as one of original creation. This poem is hybrid in every form of the word as it incorporates various sources, styles, and linguistic registers and re-casts the history of Elagabal as an open-ended quest for meaning. It also brings the Western tradition of studying antiquity together with the space of the Eastern Mediterranean and a lost, oriental world. The poem describes how Elagabal's "idol" was "taken from a town in Egypt / also called Heliopolis" and includes further reference to non-anthropocentric, natural forces in referring to "a sprig of cypress, a tree / consecrated to the Sun" (Shepherd, *Otherhood* 18 and 23). The hybridization of form and content finds its linguistic expression in a heteroglossia, characterized by the incorporation of ancient languages, including Latin, in the sequence of the poem that invokes the Ancient traditions on which the modern images are based. Even in antiquity, Elagabal was "other," a stranger, imported to the Western Mediterranean.

In highlighting this diachronic and global perspective, Shepherd's poem can also be said to open up an imaginative space in which the transnational relations between cultural images, topics, and people become apparent. His poem is not rooted in any clear location but rather finds itself in an in-between third space, where the hybridity of trans-historical, cultural receptions is articulated. The cultural mobility that is thereby illustrated challenges any claims to origin or cultural possession and articulates a dynamic, open-ended model of the exchange and negotiation of meaning. In the words of Jahan Ramazani, Reginald Shepherd can be said to belong to the many contemporary poets who "[conceive] the poetic imagination as transnational, a nation-crossing force that exceeds the limits of the territorial and juridical norm" (Ramazani 2). The "cross-cultural dynamics" of Shepherd's poetry reflects his own reservation toward models of identity based on exclusion and national rhetoric. The cosmopolitan imagination that it inspires can rather be seen as a mode of "language that can mediate seemingly irresolvable contradictions between the local and global, native and foreign, suspending the

sometimes exclusivist truth claims of the discrepant religious and cultural systems it puts into play, systems forced together by colonialism and modernity" (6). The history of colonialism is, in many ways, written into his poem. Not only because he alludes to Western historiography, archaeology, and relics that were taken into museums, but also because, already in Antiquity, the cult of Elagabal had been engrained in colonial enterprises. Ancient Syria had repeatedly been subject to imperial forces from the outside. Yet the cult of the local sun god spread, consequently, all over the Mediterranean world, transforming the colonial center itself. "In language, form, and subject matter," Shepherd's poem can be said to "articulate and imaginatively remake the contending forces of globalization and localization, alien influx and indigenizing resistance" and to open up a dialogical encounter between the present and the past (8).

The mobility of cultural concepts and ideas is repeatedly equated, in Shepherd's poetry, with the flow of physical substances, especially of water. Both in "Periplus" from *Otherhood* and "At Weep" from *FM*, the American geography is fused with the ancient world, and it becomes clear that a classical past echoes across the American landscape. "Song litters upstate New York maps / with classical towns, Attica, Utica, Syracuse, / Troy, lining the throughways with Latin / and Greek" (Shepherd, *FM* 26). America, it appears, has itself been colonized with ideas and an imaginary map is placed upon a real geography so that the landscapes of modern America and those of fantasy constantly merge with one another. This "displacement" of classical concepts into the "New World" can also be seen as a challenge to "monoculturalist assumptions" and "can help define an alternative to nationalist and even to civilizational ideologies" (Ramazani 28-29). The trajectories and intersections that are made apparent in Shepherd's writings transcend national and mono-cultural models of hegemony and dominance, "revealing the web of dialogic interconnections that belie them," in turn, "pluralizing and creolizing our models of culture and citizenship" (49). His last collection of poetry, *Red Clay Weather*, published posthumously, includes nature and the transnational flow of toxic substances and global warming. "A Parking Lot Just Outside the Ruins of Babylon" dramatizes the decline of nature against the background of the ruins of an ancient metropolis, which are further deteriorating since "fertilizer residues" and "pesticides" have nested in their "crumbling" mortar (Shepherd, *Red Clay Weather* 71). And while the "Euphrates is a toxic fire" and "the hanging gardens / dangle from a frayed and double-knotted / nylon rope," a "storm of chaff and shrapnel" surrounds the ancient city and "body / bag winds score the bare ruined walls of Susa with no song" (71).

With these lines, Shepherd once again points to the discourse of binary conflicts and imperial undertakings that have gained a new relevance since the war in Iraq. As he makes clear, they are situated within an age-old network of intersections and (violent) interactions. And although they cannot be overcome by poetic language alone, his transnational imagination invites us to re-consider our models of culture and identity and the (storied) world(s) in which we live. It also invites us to re-consider the cultural premises on which common notions of classicism rest. Rather than being part of a strictly separated cultural realm, Shepherd's "black classicism" illustrates the transcultural quality of the classical

tradition itself. It is neither Eurocentric nor solely relegated to the hegemonic or elitist echelons of society. Rather, it is part of the constitutive practice of literary world-making and of an intertextual exchange between times and places. In a socio-cultural sense, it connects generations of readers and writers in a textual exchange, which depends on and adapts to specific historical settings. Reginald Shepherd's variant of "black classicism" developed after the Civil Rights and Black Power movements and belongs in a postmodern context. Yet it would be wrong to interpret his classical references as a mere play with signifiers and signs. They are used to question cultural identity formations by subverting common images attached to classical heroisms and downtrodden social spaces. For Shepherd, his mode of classical reception is not solely tied to immediate concerns of emancipation from cultural hegemony through education—themes that were very much prevalent in early African American readings of the classics. It is an aesthetic practice that brings into view the "other" or outcasts of American society by illustrating the "otherness" of the classical tradition. De-familiarizing and undermining common conceptions, which connote the classical myths as "white," Eurocentric or elitist, he challenges exclusionary or essentialist cultural models. In a debate too often centered on color differences or the alleged emancipatory quality of classical receptions, Shepherd cautions us not to overvalue the sociocultural impact of "black classicism" and invites us to explore its aesthetic modes instead. By analyzing the theoretical as well as imaginative texts by African American authors who incorporate the classics into their works, the pluralistic quality of classicism becomes clear.

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