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Classicism, Cultural Mobility, Hybridity, and the Transnational Imagination in the Works of Reginald Shepherd

The essay deals with the works of the American poet Reginald Shepherd. In his poetic and theoretical writings, Shepherd has repeatedly drawn on the classical canon to problematize cultural models of identity and origin. His work can be seen as an example of what, in academic circles, has been referred to as “black classicism,” as the reception of the classical tradition by African American or Caribbean authors. Studying Shepherd’s classicism cannot only help us in interpreting his complex oeuvre, but also in thinking about the aesthetic and sociopolitical implications of black classicism in general. Starting from an overview over Shepherd’s own biographical background and theoretical reflections, the essay discusses the cultural mobility of Shepherd’s classicism as well as the transnational imagination and the model of cultural hybridity that it inspires.

“Greek mythology,” Reginald Shepherd wrote in his autobiographical sketch that opened his essay collection *Orpheus in the Bronx*, published only shortly before his death, “represented an elsewhere to my uninterestingly unhappy life, a realm where ordinary misery was ennobled [...], where things need not be pleasant but they mattered.”¹ In September 2008 Shepherd died after a long battle with cancer. Although he was one of the most productive American poets of the last two decades – he wrote five collections of poems, two volumes of critical essays and edited two anthologies of postmodern poetry – his complex oeuvre has yet to be recognized and analyzed in academic venues. During his life, he grappled with issues of social marginalization, devaluation, and identity formation – subjects that would resurface again and again in his writings and that made up the core of his creative work. As a homosexual, African-American writer who was HIV positive,² Shepherd repeatedly translated and transformed his life experiences

¹ Reginald Shepherd, *Orpheus in the Bronx: Essays on Identity, Politics, and the Freedom of Poetry* (Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan P, 2007): 14. Further references in the text, abbreviated as “OB”.

² Cf. Robert Philen, “Introduction,” in *A Martian Muse: Further Readings on Identity, Politics, and the Freedom of Poetry*, ed. Robert Philen (Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan P, 2010): 1–8; Robert Archambeau, “A Portrait of Reginald Shepherd as Philoctetes,” *Pleiades* 28.1 (2008): 159–171, 160–161.

into the de-pragmatized discourse of poetic speech and world-making – a realm that would allow him to transcend the narrow social categories which established his outsider status and that helped him to make sense of his “otherness” in American society. The category of the ‘other’ is, in fact, central to his (poetic and theoretical) writings and to the experiential status that he attributes to poetic language. While he repeatedly stressed the importance of language for constructing social identities, gender roles etc., he also highlighted their permeability and instability in the “event” of poetry.³ Poetic speech was for Shepherd one way of undermining social identity formations and constructions, of breaking up enclosed world views. Poetry, Shepherd made clear, could de-familiarize established concepts and re-negotiate their meaning within an imaginative framework. It was a space where his outsider status could be valorized and “misery” could be made meaningful.

As I want to show, the classical tradition played a fundamental role in his writings in exactly this way: as a cultural archive that he could draw on, improvising on canonized motifs and characters, and as an imaginary back cloth on which he could weave ever new configurations of identity and creative expression. I want to look at the role that the classics play in Shepherd’s oeuvre, how they function as a cultural foil that can at once be seen as familiar and as ‘other’: how their intertextual evocations raise expectations and images, stored in the cultural memory, and how their re-working in the framework of post-modern poetry questions the stable notions on which these canonized notions rest. Classical reception takes place, in Shepherd’s poetry, in an imaginative framework of cultural contact and exchange, where a seemingly Western elitist tradition of ancient motifs meets (post-)modern configurations of cultural hybridity. Ancient, mythical heroes or figures like Achilles, Orpheus, or Eros are incorporated in a sociopolitical setting of depravation, disorientation and marginalization. Repeatedly, they are viewed through the perspective of an African American ghetto and voiced by a lyric I that both knows high learning and the degraded experience of poverty and overt racism. Against this background, Shepherd’s poetry can be seen as an example of what, in academic circles, has been referred to as “black classicism,” as the reception of the classical tradition by African American or Caribbean authors. Studying Shepherd’s classicism cannot only help us in interpreting his complex oeuvre, but also in thinking about the aesthetic and sociopolitical implications of black classicism in general. In the following, I will firstly discuss the cultural mobility of Shepherd’s classicism,

³ Brian M. Reed, *Phenomenal Reading: Essays on Modern and Contemporary Poetics* (Tuscaloosa, AL: U of Alabama P, 2012): 137 – 138.

before I will turn to the transnational imagination that can be found in his poetry and the model of cultural hybridity that it inspires.

The cultural mobility of Shepherd's classicism

Over the last decade, classical reception studies have blossomed into a vibrant field of scholarly analysis in which many disciplines, including ancient history, philology, and various literatures, have become involved.⁴ Against the background of postcolonial theory and sociopolitical developments of migration and movement, it is especially the reception of the classical tradition by African (American) and Caribbean authors that has received increasing attention.⁵ What has been commonly referred to as 'black classicism' can, in many ways, be seen as a provocation: On the one hand, the term brings the ancient tradition together with social groups that had, culturally speaking, been excluded from its contents and transmission for a long time. Since the Renaissance, the classical canon has very much been associated with white class distinction and elitist learning.⁶ For the colonial powers of early modern Europe, the classics became a cultural model upon which to base their imperial ideologies and with which to literally interpret the 'other' people and worlds they encountered on their voyages of discovery and conquest.⁷ As Simon Goldhill has put it in his monograph study *Victorian Culture and Classical Antiquity*:

4 Cf., for a good overview of the field, Lorna Hardwick and Christopher Stray (eds.), *A Companion to Classical Receptions* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008).

5 For examples, see Emily Greenwood, *Afro-Greeks: Dialogues Between Classics and Anglophone Caribbean Literature in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: OUP, 2010); Lorna Hardwick and Carol Gillespie (eds.), *Classics in Post-Colonial Worlds* (Oxford: OUP, 2007); Goff, Barbara and Michael Simpson, "Introduction: Answering Another Sphinx," in *Crossroads in the Black Aegean: Oedipus, Antigone, and Dramas of the African Diaspora*, eds. Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson (Oxford: OUP, 2007): 1–37; Barbara Goff, "Your Secret Language". *Classics in the British Colonies of West Africa* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, Bristol Classical P, 2013); Martin McKinsey, *Hellenism and the Postcolonial Imagination. Yeats, Cavafy, Walcott* (Madison: Fairleigh UP, 2010); Michelle R. Warren, "Classicism, Medievalism, and the Postcolonial," *Exemplaria* 24.3 (2012): 282–292. Christopher Schliephake, "Die Blendung des Kyklopen – Antikenrezeption und postkolonialer Diskurs," *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Europäische Kulturgeschichte* 22 (2014): 13–34, offers a comprehensive survey of the field and discusses black classicism in the light of post-colonial theory.

6 Cf. Edith Hall, "Putting the Class into Classical Reception," in *A Companion to Classical Receptions*, eds. Lorna Hardwick and Christopher Stray (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008): 386–397.

7 For a detailed analysis of this process see François Hartog, *Anciens, Modernes, Sauvages* (Paris: Galaade, 2005). Cf. also Christopher Schliephake, "Ithaca Revisited – Homer's *Odyssey*

Classics has a reputation of being the imperial subject par excellence [...]. Part of the justification of the continuing study of Classics was that it formed, as well as informed, the mind, and formed the mind not just for a gentleman but for a figure of authority. A training in how to rule.⁸

In the New World, for indigenous people as well as slaves or freedmen of African ancestry, classical learning was not an option. In the United States, it was only after the Civil War that African Americans gained access to institutions where they could get a humanist education. While the classical tradition was seen as a source for emancipatory thinking and “contained,” as Eric Hairston has shown in his brilliant study, *The Ebony Column*, “philosophical, intellectual, literary, and moral understandings that did not presume black inferiority but could provide a substantive foundation for black cultural and intellectual growth”,⁹ it was nevertheless associated with a sphere of white hegemonic politics which used classical images for ‘monumental’ political representation and the negotiation of national identities after the breakdown of slavery.¹⁰

On the other hand, the culture of the African diaspora has long been seen as one of oral traditions – as opposed to written ones – as well as of embodied cultural practices that found their expressions in dances and Jazz music.¹¹ While these cultural forms and techniques were seen (and celebrated) as practices that re-valORIZED and articulated repressed life energies, black classicism calls attention to the fact that African American culture, too, has played an integral part in written culture and continues to actively partake in a literary re-working of the Western canon. More than a study of mere influence or intertextual relationships between modern and ancient works of literature, black classicism is thus about re-negotiating the cultural foundations upon which the classical canon rests in our present times. This does not entail an inversion of a sort of hierarchical access to its contents, so that African Americans suddenly have a better claim to interpretational sovereignty when it comes to ancient texts. Nor is it an invitation to an arbitrary, postmodern play with ancient motifs without having their long

and the (Other) Mediterranean Imagination,” in *The Mediterranean Other – the Other Mediterranean*, eds. Mihran Dabag and Andreas Eckl (Paderborn: Fink/Schöningh, forthcoming).

8 Simon Goldhill, *Victorian Culture and Classical Antiquity. Art, Opera, Fiction, and the Proclamation of Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2011): 2 – 3.

9 Eric Ashley Hairston, *The Ebony Column: Classics, Civilization, and the African American Reclamation of the West* (Knoxville, TN: U of Tennessee P, 2013): 2.

10 John Levi Barnard, “Ruins amidst Ruins: Black Classicism and the Empire of Slavery,” *American Literature* 86 (2014): 361 – 389, 365 – 366.

11 Cf. Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey. A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (London: OUP, 1988).

tradition and multiple ideological instrumentalizations in mind. Black classicism seems to be exactly about uncovering the sociopolitical and cultural historic undercurrents that have accompanied classical receptions over the centuries and about showing how classics could be used as instruments of power and as tools for identity formation. The latter aspect is underlined by the use of the adjective “black” that points to the racist ideology that had long determined access to (and inclusion in) the ‘Western’ canon. It also presupposes that there is a different form of classicism at play once its contents circulate within social groups or geographic regions that were colonized by hegemonic European powers. While African American or Caribbean authors have been dealing with ancient texts for at least two centuries now, the recent interest in the contact zones that are opened up and the transformations that take place between an allegedly uniform cultural canon and groups that had been exempt from it attests to the heightened sensitivity for cultural transfer processes in our time. They take their main impetus from cultural models of hybridity that have taken on a new political immediacy in the wake of post-colonial theory, de-colonization, and globalization.¹² Black classicism can itself be seen as a reaction to these processes as well as a framework for thinking about the fluidity, permeability, and inherent dynamic of identity concepts – rather than presupposing stable cultural entities or borders, it challenges dichotomies and political models of exclusionary thinking.

This agenda can be seen in many of black classicism’s finest theoretical and scholarly explorations, from Barbara Goff’s and Michael Simpson’s edited volume *Crossroads in the Black Aegean* to Emily Greenwood’s monograph study *Afro-Greeks*. As these studies show, the reception of classical texts by African (American) and Caribbean authors takes place in a “‘fluid and multi-directional’ zone of linked or networked sites which trade in [classical] representations.”¹³ Thereby, “a conjuncture between spheres of culture that are seemingly incommensurable” is opened up and “the simultaneous tension and mutuality at the heart of this relationship” is made apparent.¹⁴ The century-old Eurocentric claim to the classical canon is thus questioned and challenged. This has an emancipatory quality insofar as new layers of meaning are uncovered in ancient texts. It includes a creative encounter with them that entails a new reading practice as well as a re-working and adaption of its contents in new cultural contexts characterized by a high degree of hybridity. In this sense, black classicism does

¹² Cf. Schliephake, “Blendung.”

¹³ Goff, *Language*, 6.

¹⁴ Greenwood, *Afro-Greeks*, 8.

not deal so much with questions of origin or difference, but rather focuses on what Homi Bhabha has referred to as “the inbetween space” between seemingly separate cultures, where “the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity” takes place.¹⁵

It is also characterized by a high degree of cultural mobility. ‘Cultural mobility’ is a relatively recent paradigm in cultural theory developed by Stephen Greenblatt and others. It criticizes old models of culture that highlighted their “stability” or conceptualized them as “virtually motionless.”¹⁶ In the light of recent migrations and a heightened mobility on a global level, cultural mobility renders the “restless process through which texts, images, artifacts, and ideas are moved, disguised, translated, transformed, adapted, and reimagined in the ceaseless, resourceful work of culture.”¹⁷ It has to do both with questions of transmission and influence as well as with the material and spatio-political processes that allowed the circulation of cultural texts and norms over the centuries. This aspect makes clear why the notion of cultural mobility can be brought together with classical reception studies and with what has been termed black classicism. Black classicism is a perfect example for cultural mobility and for what happens when specific cultural texts are re-imagined in cultural contexts far removed from the particular times and places that produced them. Reginald Shepherd, it seems, was very much aware of the manifold exchange processes and cultural transfers that condition and enable cultural self-renewal and creativity. As he writes in his foreword to his collection of essays, *Orpheus in the Bronx*, literature (and especially poetry) can be seen as a central medium that enables mobility. Rather than being an indicator of “social conditions and social identity,” literature’s “potential” lay, for Shepherd, “in the degree to which it exceeds social determinations and definitions, bringing together the strange and the familiar, combining otherness and brotherhood. I have been oppressed by many things in my life, but not by literature, which enacts possibility rather than closure” (*OB*, 1). His autobiographical essay, “To Make Me Who I Am,” which follows his introductory note, makes clear why Shepherd saw literature as a medium that opened up possibilities and other worlds for him. Raised in the narrow spaces of ghetto tenements and housing projects in the Bronx, he felt constraint and social marginalization from a very early age. Born to a single mother who set all of her hopes on her only son, but who was to die when Reginald was fourteen years old (he moved to his aunt in Georgia afterwards), his

¹⁵ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994): 56.

¹⁶ Stephen Greenblatt, “Cultural Mobility: An Introduction,” in *Cultural Mobility. A Manifesto*, eds. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (Cambridge: CUP, 2009): 1–23, 3.

¹⁷ Greenblatt, “Cultural Mobility,” 4.

childhood was dominated by a feeling of estrangement and isolation. The many books that his mother kept in their home were the only escape from a world marked by abject poverty. At first, the books offered imaginative escapes from the daily misery, later, when Shepherd became an aspiring writer, they did so in a material sense as well.

It is interesting to note the huge importance Shepherd attributes to his early contact with handbooks and novels of Greek myth. To him, they presented a “world” where “suffering and death were made beautiful and important: mundane experience underwent a sea change into something rich and strange” (*OB*, 14). The world of Greek mythical heroes and gods became a moral and ethical grid which presented a different set of rules and explanations than the social and Christian belief systems that surrounded him. As Shepherd puts it, their “insistence on a world ruled by law and justice and a moral order bore no resemblance to the world I suffered every day, except in the harshness and rigidity of its proscriptions” (*OB*, 14–15). Accordingly, the Greek heroes that he read about became, for him, archetypal figures and models, whose actions and being resonated more with his experience of the narrow world of the ghetto than the cultural projections of America in the 1960s or 1970s. It is this sense of identification with ancient motifs and norms that characterize the cultural mobility of Shepherd’s classicism and that are recurring subjects all through his work. In the end, it led to identification with the ancients: “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” (*OB*, 14).

In his essay “The Other’s Other. Against Identity Poetry, for Possibility,” Shepherd formulates an aesthetic and programmatic statement on poetry that can be read as the ultimate reflection of the cultural mobility of his classicism:

In my work I wish to make Sappho and the South Bronx, the myth of Hyacinth and the homeless black men ubiquitous in the cities of the decaying American empire, AIDS and all the beautiful, dead cultures, speak to and acknowledge one another. (*OB*, 44)

This can also be read as a characterization of the cultural mode of black classicism in general, the meeting and contact of cultural expressions and contexts that are, at first sight, completely different, but that somehow interact, comment on and transform one another. A very distinct socio-cultural background, the African American ghetto life and the diagnosis of the “decay” of the American empire, is read against the classical tradition and the world of Greek myth. This has

the curious effect of questioning identities¹⁸ and the social rendering of them. Outsiders and outcasts appear, in the vocabulary and motifs of Greek myth, as archetypal figures themselves, as culturally valorized versions that have a value (and virtue) in and for themselves. Shepherd's black classicism is about interpreting and reading American (ghetto) life through the lens of classical texts and thereby about breaking up the narrow and enclosed world views which impose social identity roles on the cultures and people living there. Shepherd's poetry, more than "an escape from the world" has to be understood then as "a challenge to that world" (*OB*, 32) and as a distinct mode of experience, where stable and familiar categories crumble in the face of de-familiarization and poetic speech, where an African American beggar can appear in the guise of a Greek god, and an orphaned child as a black Orpheus.

The myth of Orpheus indeed looms large in Shepherd's poetry and, as the title of his last essay collection suggests, he has repeatedly stylized himself as a mythological figure. "Orpheus in the Bronx" is another way of phrasing Shepherd's black classicism, of fusing poetic world making and the quest for beauty with the social realities of African American inner city life. His 2007 collection of poetry, *Fata Morgana*, opens with two poems that evoke the myth of Orpheus in their title: "Orpheus Plays the Bronx" is a deeply personal meditation on a traumatic incident in the life of the speaker, who remembers a suicide attempt by his (or her) mother.¹⁹ From the opening line of the narrative ("When I was ten [...] my mother, / tried to kill herself"),²⁰ 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 ("Tanqueray bottles / halo the bed") and numbed by pills, 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." The colorful picture in what appears to be a collection of ancient mythological stories (supposedly for children) finds its verbal expression within the poem: blue, red, yellow, purple, black, and white are all featured in it, while the names of the singers

18 As Shepherd puts it, "to be situated in and constrained by an identity is the origin of the impulse to nonidentity, the longing to be free of the obligation to *be* somebody, somebody everyone else knew what to call" (*OB*, 22, emphasis in original).

19 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 (*OB*, 7–38). In *Red Clay Weather* (2011), the poem "My Mother Dated Otis Redding" (30) uses similar motifs.

20 Reginald Shepherd, *Fata Morgana* (Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh UP, 2007): 6. Further references in the text, abbreviated as *FM*.

Al Green and Barry White, whose songs are referred to in 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”²¹ that had dominated the political climate and racial rhetoric of American policy well into the second half of the twentieth century. 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 saw: “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 bit by a snake finds its equivalent in the pills that the mother spilled 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 which 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 as it were, 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 per se, 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 lyric I 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 which is otherwise characterized by its use of enjambments is an indicator that a kind of closure has been reached and that the lyrical I accepts the fate of his/her mother.

“Five Fellings for Orpheus” (*FM*, 3–5) is characterized by a similar verse structure and a paratactic syntax as well as a decentered speaker and a language that melds beauty and decay, bringing together an industrial Chicago riverfront with the motifs of myth. A searching, bewildered Orpheus watches as the river flows by and drowns in his memories, while the landscape becomes a fluid ter-

21 For a discussion of the “color line” and its significance for Shepherd’s poetry, see also Reed, *Reading*, 141–142.

rain that is as instable as the identity of the person in question. Vivid environmental impressions and the landscapes of the mind, the Chicago River and the river Styx flow into one another to create the image of loss and loneliness against the background of urban nature. Here as elsewhere in his poetry, Shepherd manages to create hybrid landscapes that bring contemporary (urban) America together with the worlds of a mythical Arcadia or the historic sites in ancient Greece, Egypt, or Rome. He thus confronts the brutal realities of life in the twentieth and twenty-first century with the idealized worlds of fantasy and finds poetic beauty that attribute to the world of the outsider or other – the orphaned child, the homeless beggar, the lovesick homosexual – the status of myth. They are imaginatively re-figured in poetic speech and gain a new meaning and value in the face of social devaluation, disorientation or poverty. In the following, I want to look at another effect of Shepherd's black classicism, namely at the cultural hybridity and transnational imagination that it inspires.

Cultural hybridity and the transnational imagination in Shepherd's poetry

Cultural hybridity is one of the recurring themes and concerns in Shepherd's writings. His classicism plays a central role in channeling the various discourses and cultural as well as poetic traditions that make up his own hybrid identity. In his 2003 volume of verse, *Otherhood*, he repeatedly grapples with the issues of identity politics, exclusionary world views, and how these can be questioned and challenged by poetry. As Reed has noted, *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. "Sexuality, poetics, and history – official and subcultural – collide" and "images and signifiers with a hurtful history" are countered "with an aestheticizing imagination."²² 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 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 vi-

²² Reed, *Reading*, 140.

sion.”²³ In the poem “Homology”, for instance, the Greek god “Apollo is black, wolf to / the moon, *Sol* burnt / to cinders in my blind eye / (black stones sears sky, white / shadow covers day).”²⁴ 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”). The lyric thus problematizes cultural divisions and categorizations in the 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 of 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’).” 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,”²⁵ 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.”²⁶ 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

23 Reed, *Reading*, 140.

24 Reginald Shepherd, *Otherhood* (Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh UP, 2003): 49. Further references abbreviated as “OH”.

25 Reed, *Reading*, 144.

26 Reginald Shepherd, “Introduction”, in *Lyric Postmodernisms: An Anthology of Contemporary Innovative Poetries*, ed. Reginald Shepherd (Denver, CO: Counterpath P, 2008): xi–xvii, xii.

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.”²⁷ 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.”²⁸ What Shepherd referred to, again and again in his theoretical writings, as the “freedom of poetry” has to be understood against the background of these theoretical insights. For although Shepherd was convinced of the autonomy of art, he also recognized its social contexts and cultural rootedness.²⁹ To him, poetic language offered the possibility of breaking out of the narrow confines that he experienced as a social outsider – first, as an orphaned boy from the ghetto, later as a homosexual African American poet – and of re-figuring narrow definitions of ‘self’ and ‘other’. His engagement with the classical tradition was a way of exploring questions of originality and the possibility of variations of old themes in the context of postmodern America. While Shepherd was very much aware of tradition and used explicit intertextual references in his poetic work, he can nevertheless be characterized as what has been referred to as an “American hybrid” poet. As Swensen puts it, their “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.”³⁰ This hybrid aesthetic “reconsider[s] the ethics of language, on the one hand, and redraft[s] our notions of a whole, on the other.”³¹

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” (*OH*, 18–23) is a long meditation on death and re-birth and 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

27 Shepherd, “Introduction,” xi–xii.

28 Shepherd, “Introduction,” xi.

29 On the notion of the “freedom of poetry,” see Shepherd’s essay collections *OB* and *A Martian Muse: Further Readings on Identity, Politics, and the Freedom of Poetry*, ed. Robert Philen (Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan P, 2010). On the role of tradition for contemporary African American poets, see also Charles Henry Rowell, “Writing Self, Writing Community. An Introduction,” in *Angels of Ascent. A Norton Anthology of Contemporary African American Poetry*, ed. Charles H. Rowell (New York: Norton, 2013): xxix–liii.

30 Cole Swensen, “Introduction,” in *American Hybrid. A Norton Anthology of New Poetry*, eds. Cole Swensen and David St. John (New York: Norton, 2009): xvii–xxvi, xxi.

31 Swensen, “Introduction,” xvi.

and quotes taken from such diverse sources as the King James Bible, Edward Gibbon's *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."³² 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 points to the instability of historical sense making, but also questions 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 the study of antiquity together with the space of the Eastern Mediterranean and a lost, oriental world ("His idol taken from a town of Egypt / also called Heliopolis" [18]; "a sprig of cypress, a tree / consecrated to the Sun" [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 had been "other," a stranger, imported to the Western Mediterranean, from where he travelled a long way further West.

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,"³³ 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."³⁴ The "cross-cultural dynamics"³⁵ 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

³² Archambeau, "Portrait," 168.

³³ Cf. Bhabha, *Location*.

³⁴ Ramazani, Jahan, *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 2009): 2.

³⁵ Ramazani, *Transnational*, 3.

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.³⁶

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, in consequence, all over the Mediterranean world, from where it changed 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”³⁷ and to open up a dialogical encounter between the present and the past.

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” (*OH*, 27–29) and “At Weep” (*FM*, 25–26) the American geography is fused with the ancient world and it becomes clear that a faraway past is a constant presence even in places where it has never occurred. “Song litters upstate New York maps / with classical towns, Attica, Utica, Syracuse, / Troy, lining the throughways with Latin / and Greek” (*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.”³⁸ 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.”³⁹ In his last collection of poetry, *Red Clay Weather*, published posthumously, they even include nature and the transnational flow of toxic substances and global warming.

³⁶ Ramazani, *Transnational*, 6.

³⁷ Ramazani, *Transnational*, 8.

³⁸ Ramazani, *Transnational*, 28–29.

³⁹ Ramazani, *Transnational*, 49.

“A Parking Lot Just Outside the Ruins of Babylon”⁴⁰ 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. 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.” 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.

In my essay, I have dealt with one of the most interesting American poets of the last two decades. Reginald Shepherd’s writings show many parallels with the work of his contemporaries,⁴¹ including a cosmopolitan outlook, a suspicion of cultural identity formations and a self-reflective questioning of the power of language to describe reality. In his lyric mode of black classicism, he has created a distinct imaginative take on how cultural ideas about origin, identity, and hegemony circulate and come into being. He has repeatedly fused the world of modern America with that of myth and fantasy, creating third spaces of the imagination where monocultural and mononational images are undermined by the open-ended circulation of signifiers and signs and an unresolved quest for meaning. His black classicism underlines the dialogic modes of cultural interaction and the manifold, often heterogeneous elements and intersections upon which models of identity are formed. In doing so, he has fused myth and imagination in Orphic songs that resonate deeply in the landscapes of Arcadia and the back alleys of the Bronx alike.

⁴⁰ Reginald Shepherd, *Red Clay Weather*, ed. R. Philen (Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh UP, 2011): 71.

⁴¹ See Timo Müller, “Transnationalism in Contemporary Black Poetry: Derek Walcott, Rita Dove, and the Sonnet Form,” in *Transnational American Studies*, ed. Udo J. Hebel (Heidelberg: Winter, 2012): 249–268.

