

Review Essay

Re-rooting the classical tradition: new directions in black classicism

Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson *Crossroads in the Black Aegean: Oedipus, Antigone, and Dramas of the African Diaspora*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. xii + 401 pp, £68.00 (Hardback). ISBN: 9780199217182.

Robert G. O'Meally *Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey*. New York: DC Moore Gallery, 2007. 116 pp, \$45 (Hardback). ISBN: 9780977496594.

Patrice Rankine *Ulysses in Black: Ralph Ellison, Classicism, and African American Literature*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006. 272 pp, (Hardback). ISBN: 9780299220006. Out of print. Paperback edition published in 2008, 272 pp, \$24.95 (Paperback). ISBN: 9780299220044.

Michele Valerie Ronnick (ed.) *The Autobiography of William Sanders Scarborough: An American Journey from Slavery to Scholarship*. Foreword by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005. xvi + 425 pp, \$29.95 (Hardback). ISBN: 9780814332245.

Tracy L. Walters *African American Literature and the Classicist Tradition: Black Women Writers from Wheatley to Morrison*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. 224 pp, \$80 (Hardback). ISBN: 9780230600225.

The past five years have seen the publication of several works in the field of black classicism, from Michele Valerie Ronnick's edition of the *Autobiography* of the African American classicist William Sanders Scarborough, published in 2005, to Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson's *Crossroads in the Black Aegean*, Robert O'Meally's *Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey*, and Tracey Walters' *African American Literature and the Classicist Tradition*, all published in 2007.

That these works should have been published roughly contemporaneously is notable in and of itself, but more exciting still is the fact that their publication represents a critical mass in the field of black classicism, at once consolidating the field and signalling new directions for future work.¹ Black classicism itself is not new: contemporary research on race and 'blackness' in classical antiquity looks back to Frank Snowden's research in this field (*Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* (1970), and *Before Colour Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks* (1983)). Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* trilogy (1987, 1991, 2006) is an important turning point in this regard. Prior to *Black Athena*, the study of black classicism was largely internal to the black intellectual community in America, which was familiar with the appropriation of Classics by key figures

¹ Greenwood (2009) will supplement this research with a study of the uses of Classics in the Anglophone Caribbean in the twentieth century.

in the black tradition, such as Marcus Garvey and W. E. B. Du Bois, as well as polemical studies such as George G. M. James's *Stolen Legacy* (1954).² However, until recently black classicism has been a disparate field of research, with scholars undertaking isolated research in departments of Africana Studies, American Literature, Classics, Comparative Literature and History. Although the classicist Shelley Haley has been publishing and speaking about black classicism for several decades (see e.g. Haley 1989, 1993), it was only as recently as 1996 that 'Classica Africana' was launched as a specialization within Classics.³

This new wave of research into black classicism has enlarged the debate, linking historical research on race in Graeco-Roman antiquity to the study of the role that Classics has played in the larger cultural traditions of black America and Africa. Two recent studies have focused on Classics in African American literature and culture (Rankine 2006, and Walters 2007), and another has examined black classicism in the visual art of the African American artist Romare Bearden (O'Meally 2007). O'Meally's study of Bearden's 'Odysseus Suite' reveals Bearden to be an artist of the black diaspora, who took his visual symbols and colour palette from Africa, the Mediterranean and the Caribbean, while his method fused 'high' European art with Jazz composition and the 'lowlier' scissor-work of collage. A quotation from O'Meally neatly illustrates the shift away from a positivist, historical focus on blackness in Graeco-Roman antiquity to the presence of blackness in a composite, classical tradition. Writing about Bearden's depiction of the sea god Poseidon as pursuer of Odysseus, and the influence of the technique of black figure vase painting on Bearden's depiction, O'Meally comments:

When Bearden makes the mighty god of multiple, ambiguous powers a figure in black, he is not making another Beethoven-was-black- claim of racial authenticity or one-upmanship. Rather, he is insisting that we see him as a culturally collaged figure, black in skin color and, in terms of broad cultural reaches, a man of many parts: black, brown, and beige.⁴

This emphasis on figuration and how the black tradition figures the Classics is even more explicit in Patrice Rankine's *Ulysses in Black* (2006), which studies the literary equivalent to Bearden's 'figures in black'.

There are complex reasons for the expansion of black classicism at the present time. To a certain extent classicists are responding to the creative receptions of Classics in high-profile literary fiction by black authors, such as in the works of Toni Morrison, Wole Soyinka and Derek Walcott (although Soyinka and Walcott do not welcome the 'black author' tag). It is also no coincidence that black classicism has developed in the same period that Classical Reception studies is enjoying such a boom — a boom of which this journal is a product. We have reached the stage where every Classics department in the Anglophone world is conscious of issues of access and relevance, with the result that the study of the diversity and plurality of Graeco-Roman Classics and what they have meant to different readers and communities in different social, historical and cultural contexts is an obvious element of

2 See a forthcoming essay by Margaret Malamud on 'Classics and Race in the Early American Republic'.

3 Michele Valerie Ronnick organized a panel on 'Classica Africana' at the 1996 annual meeting of the American Philological Association. See Ronnick (2005: 334, n. 10).

4 O'Meally (2007: 15).

the discipline. Consequently, a unitary classical tradition has given way to plural classical traditions. At the same time, both geopolitical shifts such as Postcolonial transitions and globalization, and changing disciplinary cultures within Arts and Humanities faculties, have meant that classicists have been more open to the different societies within ancient Greek or Roman society and the different cultures within these heterogeneous worlds (Chew 1997: 58–9).

As part of this reappraisal of the cultures of Greece and Rome it makes just as much sense — sometimes more — to compare Greek tragedy with Yoruba tragedy, as with English Renaissance revenge drama, or Racine. Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson make this argument powerfully in their *Crossroads in the Black Aegean* (2007), which studies Oedipus and Antigone as figures of (violent) cultural transmission within dramatic adaptations of Greek tragedy in Africa and the black diaspora. Goff and Simpson's book is notable for the supplement which they propose to Paul Gilroy's 'Black Atlantic' model (Gilroy 1993). In this influential work, Gilroy proposed the Black Atlantic as a 'transcultural, international formation', in order to explain the intertwining of Europe, America, Africa and the Caribbean in black cultures in the Atlantic world (1993: 4). For Gilroy, the Black Atlantic is symbolized by the image of ships, criss-crossing the Atlantic, particularly in the context of the triangular slave trade, connecting Europe, Africa and the Americas. Goff's and Simpson's construct of the 'Black Aegean' is 'a triangle, projected from within the Black Atlantic and symmetrical with it, but with its third point radiating eastwards so that it links Africa to ancient Greece and Asia Minor as well as to the imperial West' (38–39). Contrasted with the figure of Black Athena, which comes with unwieldy baggage (notably the debate between the classicist Mary Lefkowitz and Afrocentrist critics),⁵ the Black Aegean offers a fluid and multi-directional framework for making sense of the different trajectories of cultural transmission that might be present in any one example of classical reception in the black diaspora. The following extract from their discussion of the play *The Gods are Not to Blame* (1969), by the Nigerian playwright Ola Rotimi, offers an insight into the complicated Oedipal genealogies that can be used to reconfigure the linear model of European descent implicit in the 'traditional' classical tradition:

To the extent that the Greek myth of Oedipus is used by *The Gods* to propose that the colonizers and the colonized now share a history, in the form of a common parent, both groups can suppose either that the colonized possess Hellenic qualities or that the colonizers possess African cultural characteristics. This startling implication is articulated, as we have seen, not only by the content of the myth, in which an extreme endogamy prevails, but also within *The Gods* itself, where Yoruba and Greek elements cannot be categorized exclusively. Insofar as *The Gods* deploys the Greek myth to represent colonial exogamy collapsing into colonial endogamy, and offers itself as the cultural issue of that union, the whole Western tradition of polarizing Greek and African cultures is shortcircuited. Either Africans share cultural qualities with the Greeks, or the former colonizers share qualities with Africans.⁶

5 For an overview and critical discussion of this debate, see the volume of essays edited by Mary Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers (Lefkowitz and Rogers 1996), and Berlinerblau (1999). For Lefkowitz's argument with Afrocentrism in the context of the Black Athena debate, see Lefkowitz (1997). The legacy of Bernal's *Black Athena* was the subject of a recent 'African Athena' conference at Warwick University organized by Daniel Orrells (6–8 November 2008).

6 Goff and Simpson (2007: 111–12).

In addition to the construct of ‘the Black Aegean’, Goff and Simpson’s study also suggests a stimulating new direction for black classicism by postulating that two figures from Greek mythology, Oedipus and Antigone, possess particular explanatory power within black classicism. The choice of these two figures, who have also loomed large in diverse European receptions of Greek tragedy, is felicitous for the kind of criss-crossing African–American–Caribbean–European and ancient Mediterranean filiation that Goff and Simpson propose. However, as the other works under review show, there are other figures who might lay claim to competing significance in the black diaspora: Odysseus/Ulysses is an obvious example, as demonstrated by the studies of Rankine and O’Meally, as are Black Orpheus (Orphée Noir), Medea, and Demeter and Persephone.⁷ One of the challenges for black classicism as it moves forward is to resist a critical straightjacket. Goff and Simpson are right to focus on the incestuous dramas of Oedipus and Antigone as being uniquely pertinent to the violent intimacy that vexes historical and indeed personal relationships in the Black Atlantic. But there are other aspects of the complex histories of the Black Atlantic that are best articulated through other myths. In turn, the presence of alternative myths in creative receptions of Classics in black traditions offers rich and diverse ground for future research.

In all, Goff and Simpson discuss six dramatic works: *The Gods Are Not to Blame* by Ola Rotimi (Chapter 2); *The Darker Face of the Earth* by the African American playwright Rita Dove (Chapter 3); *The Gospel at Colonus* by American writer and director Lee Breuer (Chapter 4); *Odale’s Choice*, by the Barbadian poet and academic Kamau Brathwaite (Chapter 5); *The Island* by the South African playwrights Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona (Chapter 6); and Nigerian playwright Femi Osofisan’s *Tegonni: An African Antigone* (Chapter 7). Chapter 5 also reads Brathwaite’s play in conjunction with Walcott’s epic verse novel *Omeros*. The comparative dimension between the West African, African American and Caribbean plays is achieved through the coherence supplied by the myths of Oedipus and Antigone, and the concept of the Black Aegean which posits a triangulation of the debate with the Greek past. At any one location, the debate with the Greek past will entail references to other locations that have also related themselves to the cultures of Greece. Goff and Simpson’s study appears at a timely juncture: in recent years, there have been several excellent studies of the individual plays which they discuss, as well as two important books by Kenneth Wetmore Jr.⁸ Arguing against a strand of interpretation developed in different ways by Wetmore, Hardwick and Budelmann, which identifies the appeal of Greek tragedy in its affinities with traditional West African cultures (Wetmore, Budelmann), and in its capacity as a decolonized art form (Hardwick), Goff and Simpson suggest that these adaptations are ‘polarized between an oedipal love and hate for the colonizer’s culture [and] . . . between their relationship with the colonial culture and their relationship with an indigenous culture’ (59–60).⁹ This is a debate that will continue, particularly since re-performance enables these plays to be played differently, taking cues from the cultural accretions that the Greek dramas have acquired in different contexts (Hardwick 2006).

7 On Black Orpheus, see Wetmore (2003: Ch. 1); on Medea, see Haley (1995), Wetmore (2003: Ch. 4) and Rankine (2006: 94–103). On Demeter and Persephone, see Walters (2007).

8 McDonald (2000); Budelmann (2005, 2007); Djisenu (2007); Gibbs (2007); Wetmore (2002, 2003). Although not exclusive to African adaptations, there is relevant theoretical discussion in Hardwick (2005, 2006).

9 *Contra* Wetmore (2002), Budelmann (2005) and Hardwick (2005).

By building on and advancing existing scholarship on adaptations of Greek tragedy in the African diaspora, Goff and Simpson have brought the complexity and sophistication familiar from the extensive scholarship on Greek tragedy to the study of these adaptations, which are original classics in their own right. The significance of their study for African literature and theatre, black classicism and comparative literature is obvious; it is to be hoped that their research will feed back into the study of Sophocles' Theban plays as well.

Another important development in the study of black classicism has been the increased attention paid to the history of black classical scholarship. Here Michele Valerie Ronnick's contribution has been immense. Aside from the two works reviewed here, Ronnick has published widely on African American classicists.¹⁰ However, it is Ronnick's edition of the *Autobiography* of the black classicist, William Sanders Scarborough, and her separate edition of his *Works* (2006) that have had the greatest impact on the field. The significance of Ronnick's study is apparent when one considers an article by Robert Fikes, Jr, published in volume 53 of *The Negro Educational Review* (Fikes 2002), in which he gives a short biographical and bibliographical overview of the tradition of black classicism and the careers of black classicists. That the existence of black classicists still bears remarking is a sad indictment of the putative whiteness of classicism and the classical tradition, not to mention the way in which knowledge of Classics was spuriously used, right up until the 1960s — some might say later still — as a biased test-case for the intelligence of Africans and people of African descent.¹¹

In their respective books, both Rankine and Walters draw attention to the flipside of the perceived whiteness of Classics and the exclusion of African Americans from the Classical tradition: namely the exclusion of Classics from African American intellectual traditions.¹² For Rankine, there is a deep schism in the term black classicism, and a central tenet of his study is that their engagement with Graeco-Roman Classics has estranged Ralph Ellison and other African American authors within the Black Tradition.¹³ Conversely, Rankine's study is committed to demonstrating that 'black classicism can in fact be part of a radical cultural identity' (Rankine 2006: 42). Similarly, Walters remarks that the reception of Classics in the work of black women writers had been neglected not just because classicists overlook 'the classical revisions of African Americans', but also 'because some African Americanists dismiss the Western classics as Eurocentric and antithetical to a Black literary tradition — or Black aesthetic' (Walters 2007: 5).

This is what makes the life and academic career of William Sanders Scarborough (1852–1926) such a compelling subject for black classicism. The publication of Scarborough's autobiography, almost a century after his death, has had the interesting consequence of introducing a countercultural icon into the debate about the role of the Classics in African American intellectual life. Scarborough, who was born of slave status in Georgia shortly

10 An online bibliography of Ronnick's relevant works is available at the following web address: <http://www.langlab.wayne.edu/mvr/black_classicists/biblio.html> [accessed 13 October 2009]

11 See Rankine (2006: 30–1). See also Martha Southgate's novel, *The Fall of Rome* (2002), which explores the implicit racial politics of the discipline of Classics and the potential tension between Classics and black identity through the figure of Jerome Washington, an African American Latin teacher at an elite private school in Connecticut. I thank Irene Peirano for bringing this book to my attention.

12 See Gates (2003: *passim*).

13 Rankine (2006: 19), 'black classicism negatively affects the reception of the works of black authors'.

before the American Civil War, attended Atlanta University for two years and then transferred to Oberlin College, from which he graduated in 1875 with an A.B. in Liberal Arts (Oberlin awarded Scarborough an honorary M.A. in 1882). After a brief career as a schoolmaster, Scarborough was elected to the Chair of Greek and Latin Classics at Wilberforce University in 1877, and subsequently in 1908 to the office of President of Wilberforce, a position which he held for twelve years (1908–20). As a classicist, his publications include a Greek textbook, *First Lessons in Greek* (1881), and several scholarly papers delivered before scholarly associations on subjects ranging from ‘The Theory and Function of the Thematic Vowel in the Greek Verb’ to ‘The Greeks and Suicide.’¹⁴ Details of these papers can be found in the section on ‘Classical Philology’ in Ronnick’s edition of Scarborough’s works.¹⁵

As with W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, Scarborough’s contemporaries, there is a temptation to elevate Scarborough to the status of a man whose genius triumphed over adversity and injustice. The autobiography tells a more complicated story in which Scarborough’s very considerable achievements as a scholar were won in spite of continuous setbacks. Notwithstanding the passage of years between Scarborough’s lifetime and our own, it is deeply shaming for classicists to read of a ‘colleague’ excluded on grounds of his race from hotels that were meant to be hosting the delegates of academic conferences at which he had been invited to speak, never being able to rely on a constant salary even when in possession of a tenured chair at Wilberforce, denied a pension after forty-three years of service to the profession, and having to rely upon rare ingenuity to get access to the publications that he needed for his research. How much more could Scarborough have achieved if he had had the financial wherewithal enjoyed by white Classics professors at other institutions? By Scarborough’s account he was often driven into debt by the non-payment of his salary or by his generosity in trying to keep Wilberforce afloat during lean periods. These straightened circumstances impinged on his scholarship; for example, Scarborough tells us that in 1889 he had completed the manuscript of an edition of Andocides, which was left to languish because he did not have the means and connections to publish it (105). At several points Scarborough refers with dignified understatement to the humiliations of travel and the prejudice and poverty to which this often exposed him.¹⁶

The *Autobiography* reveals Scarborough’s reliance on influential patrons, black and white, throughout his career, and the patronage that he extended to others in turn, both black and white. As a respected Negro leader, Scarborough became a powerful advocate in politics, and was courted for his ability to sway the black vote.¹⁷ The racial politics revealed in Scarborough’s account are fascinating, but no less so is the nature of the *Autobiography* itself as an extended lesson in civility and humanity. The author shames the racist institutions of his day with matter-of-fact accounts of their bigotry, and by the pointed counter-examples of those individuals and institutions who treated him with courtesy and the respect due to him as a man.

14 A notice of the former, taken from *TAPA* 15 (1884), is reprinted in Ronnick (2006: 273), while a summary of the latter, from *TAPA* 38 (1907), is reprinted in Ronnick (2006: 331–2).

15 Ronnick (ed.) (2006: 273–332).

16 See e.g. Scarborough’s failure to secure accommodation in Williamstown, related on p. 134: ‘I... found myself on the way forced to put up with one of those situations so inconvenient and humiliating to the race.’

17 Although the term ‘Negro’ is now widely regarded as pejorative, it was the signifier of black identity used by Scarborough and his contemporaries.

Scarborough's success as a classicist is interesting from the perspective of the history of scholarship, but more striking still is the symbolic authority which this classical education, supposedly the basis for civilization and humanity, gave him in being able to speak and write back to his contemporaries on the evil and injustice of racial prejudice.¹⁸ Classics as a human qualification is an ever-present thread in the *Autobiography*, driven home by James Calhoun's sneer, which Scarborough refers to in three different places, that 'if he could find a Negro who knew the Greek syntax, he would then believe that the Negro was a human being and should be treated as a man'.¹⁹

The cultural symbolism of the black classicist in the decades after emancipation is conveyed in an electrifying passage in which Scarborough records accepting an invitation to deliver a paper on Plato at the University of Virginia in July 1892:

I was on the program for my paper on 'The Chronological Order of Plato's Works,' designing to prove the order in point of time of Plato's writings by the Greek used by him and by the circumstances that surrounded him at the time of writing. The [session] was held in the Rotunda of the University used as its library. The white aristocracy of the city turned out in large numbers. There was hardly standing room. On the walls hung the portraits of Jefferson Davis, the President of the Southern Confederacy, Gen. Robert E. Lee of the Confederate Army and other prominent Southern generals. The feeling that came over me was a strange one, as I stepped forward to present my paper. Every eye was fixed upon me and a peculiar hush seemed to pervade the room. It was a rare moment. Like a flash the past unrolled before my mind, my early Atlanta examinations, Calhoun's famous challenge, that no Negro could learn Greek. For a moment I felt embarrassed as I faced my audience aware too that they must experience a peculiar feeling at the situation — a Negro member of that learned body standing in intellectual manhood among equals and where no Negro had ever been allowed even to enter, save as a servant — a Negro to discuss the writings of a Greek philosopher.²⁰

There is much in this passage alone that merits discussion. Scarborough's depiction here and elsewhere, of the intersection of intellectual manhood and black masculinity raises questions about the role of black women in the struggle for the uplift of the race, about his own interracial marriage — the politics of which are glossed over — and the alternative model of classicism espoused by the confederate leaders whose portraits witness Scarborough's lecture.²¹

18 For the idea of Classics as a qualification for civilization and for the pre-occupation of black intellectuals with demonstrating civilization through learning in this period, see the Reverend Alexander Crummell's inaugural address to the American Negro Academy, entitled 'Civilization the Primal Need of the Race', delivered on 5 March 1897 (Crummell 1898a: 3–7).

19 See Ronnick (2005: 7 and 342, n. 29). Of Calhoun's sneer, Crummell comments: 'Just think of the crude asininity of even a great man! Mr. Calhoun went to "Yale" to study the Greek syntax and graduated there. His son went to Yale to study the Greek syntax, and graduated there. His grandson, in recent years, went to Yale, to learn the Greek syntax, and graduated there. Schools and Colleges were necessary for the Calhouns, and all other white men to learn the Greek syntax' (Crummell 1898b: 11).

20 Scarborough in Ronnick (2005: 121).

21 See Winterer (2002: 21) on the 'culture of classicism' in the American South. The alternative model of classicism which I allude to here is the classicism that was mobilized to underwrite the ideals of the American Republic, but which was also frequently used to justify slave-owning as a 'classical' institution.

In this context, it is important to reflect that Scarborough pursued not a black classicism, or a white classicism, but a classicism beyond colour and accessible to all races. As Scarborough is co-opted into black classicism we should distinguish between his commitment to pursuing Classics and other academic subjects to further the advancement of the race, and other versions of black classicism in which the Classics are variously rejected, subverted and adapted in ways that Scarborough did not envisage.

That we can now study and reflect upon Scarborough's classicism is entirely due to Michele Ronnick's edition of his *Autobiography*, which is the result of years of careful archival work, tracking down correspondence and newspapers for which Scarborough wrote, or in which he was written about. The introductory essay and the notes to the individual chapters supply an excellent scholarly basis for future research on Scarborough. Then there is the considerable editing that has gone into the presentation of the *Autobiography*, most of which is signalled in square brackets in the main text.²² Ronnick informs us that she has 'stabilized' Scarborough's voice, converting any third-person references to first-person references, so that the entire *Autobiography* in this edition is told in a first-person voice. The text is undoubtedly more intelligible and readable as a result of this policy, but scholars working closely on Scarborough's voice and self-representation will want to consult the manuscript to examine the fluctuation between first- and third-person narrative. Since the publication of the *Autobiography* in 2005, Ronnick has published an edition of Scarborough's *Works* (2006), containing a representative sample of Scarborough's speeches and his academic and journalistic prose. As noted above, there is a section devoted to Scarborough's publications in Classical Philology, excluding Scarborough's two major classical publications, *First Lessons in Greek* (1881), and *The Birds of Aristophanes: A Theory of Interpretation* (1886).

In the Introduction to Scarborough's *Autobiography*, Ronnick frames *Classica Africana* as a new sub-field of the classical tradition, and presents a roll call of authors who might be said to constitute the black classical tradition.²³ This roll call is problematic for its historical, geographical and cultural heterogeneity, and for the fact that it lists people of African descent, but no African authors. To postulate a black classicism/*Classica Africana* is to posit a dialogue between black authors; it also brings us back to Bernal and the *Black Athena* controversy, because black classicism in the Americas (including the Caribbean) cannot duck the complex historical relationships between the cultures of Africa, Greece, Rome and modern Europe.²⁴ This is a case that was made forcefully in Kenneth Wetmore Jr's books on adaptations of the classics in black theatre and literature (Wetmore 2002, 2003) and now, as we have seen, in Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson's *Crossing the Black Aegean*.

Some of the theorizing necessary to develop the field of *Classica Africana* is done by Patrice Rankine in the first chapter of *Ulysses in Black* (2006). Entitled 'Classica Africana: The Nascent Study of Black Classicism', the chapter offers an excellent discussion of the origins and future of black classicism and should be required reading on syllabi devoted to the black classical tradition. The range of Rankine's book is not immediately apparent from the title or table of contents. In addition to Ralph Ellison's classicism, which is the focus of the book, specifically in *The Invisible Man* (1952) and *Juneteenth* (1999), Rankine also has much to say about the potential interactions between Classics, African American literature and black

22 See Ronnick (2005: 21) for details of her editorial approach.

23 Ronnick (2005: 5).

24 See Greenwood (2004).

vernacular culture. For instance, in the second chapter ‘Birth of a Hero: The Poetics and Politics of Ulysses in Classical Literature’, in order to illustrate his thesis that ‘black classicism can be part of a radical cultural identity’ (42), Rankine demonstrates the potential for counter-hegemonic readings in classical literature by looking at the instability of the hero Odysseus/Ulysses across three classical receptions of the hero: Odysseus in *Odyssey* 9; Odysseus in Euripides’ *Hecuba*; and Ulysses in Seneca’s *Troades*. The heroism of Odysseus in *Odyssey* 9 is revealed to be internally antagonistic, made possible through its opposite. In *Hecuba*, the Trojan queen mounts a powerful subaltern challenge to Odysseus’ moral and cultural authority, and in *Troades* the agency of those who are captive cannot be manipulated by those who notionally have power over them. Drawing on the work of Orlando Patterson, Rankine skillfully uses the opposition of slave and free, which is so central to the black (and white) experience in America, to tease out the presence of these oppositions in ancient Greek and Roman literature.²⁵

Continuing the investigation of black classicism in Chapter 2, Rankine begins Chapter 3 by suggesting that one of the ways in which the black American tradition might be reconciled to the classical tradition is through a reordering of the common dichotomy that pits Graeco-Roman classics against black culture. Instead, Rankine proposes that the Classics/Black dichotomy looks different when juxtaposed with the internal tension within the classical tradition between Greek/Roman culture. Rankine argues that Roman was to Greek what Black is to the Classical tradition in the modern world and that black classicism has much to learn from the relationship between these competing cultural identities, which ‘causes a rupture in the narrative of the Western tradition’ (71). The remainder of the chapter examines the limitations of some of the theoretical debates that have dominated approaches to the study of Black classicism in the past, including Bernal’s *Black Athena*, and the corpus of Afrocentrist scholarship.

These first three chapters constitute the theoretical groundwork for Rankine’s study. Chapter 4 — a transitional chapter — offers a reading of Countee Cullen’s *Medea* and Tony Morrison’s *The Song of Solomon* which seeks to demonstrate their commitment to an integrated knowledge in which classicism has a positive part to play. The discussion of these works enables Rankine to formulate the idea of a ‘New Negro Ulysses’, in which Ulysses’s *nostos* includes both a journey into the abyss of slavery and racial discord, and a return from this underworld. Here Rankine draws on the concept of ‘the black (w)hole’, articulated by Houston A. Baker and connects it to the *katabasis* of ancient epic. The ‘New Negro Ulysses’ then serves as foil to the discussion of Ralph Ellison’s classicism in Chapters 5–7.

There is much to like and admire in Rankine’s book, including the structure and style of Rankine’s argument, which reflect the book’s theme. The book is structured as a *katabasis*, with a view into the abyss and a journey out again — the abyss being the segregated world view in which Classics is an inveterate, white, discipline with nothing positive to offer black readers. There are many smart turns of phrase as well, including this nice play on the roots motif, which suggests the potential of Classics to be part of a revised roots narrative: ‘The aim of this chapter is to unearth some of the root qualities of classical literature that might have timeless appeal to writers — and, in this context, black writers specifically’ (38). However, most impressive of all is the thoroughgoing and successful attempt to invent a

25 Patterson (1991).

coherent theoretical framework for the discussion of black classicism in relation to the black tradition. This work speaks equally to scholars and students in classics, black studies and comparative literature.

When Rankine writes on page 20, that ‘the current phenomenon of the study of black classicism represents a yearning toward the discourse of race within classical studies’, this claim begs interesting questions about the internationalism of black classicism and, as a corollary, the internationalism of blackness. As black classicism expands as an area of study, further thought will need to be given to its valency in Africa and the black diaspora. As scholars trace black classicism through changing international contexts, then discourses and concepts will have to shift. Specific discourses of race that might be appropriate to African American classical receptions will not necessarily travel to the internally diverse Caribbean, or to diverse African contexts. Goff and Simpson have suggested one model, which is to trace the circulation of mythical types within ‘the Black Aegean’, and this model does indeed allow for diversity and historical and cultural specificity: Oedipus and Antigone can signify the tragic interruption of cultural and genealogical transmission in the contexts of the transatlantic slave trade, colonialism and apartheid, while still allowing for these figures to be figured in very different ways from one author to the next. However, although Goff’s and Simpson’s study suggests that classicism can be a vehicle for an international black identity, it is not always easy to distinguish the internationalism of black classicism from the Eurocentric classical humanism that previously excluded black cultures from the Graeco-Roman legacy. The interaction of local and international black cultures warrants further investigation in future research on black classicism. As a result of their proximate publication — Rankine in 2006, and Goff and Simpson in 2007 — it was not possible for any overt dialogue to exist between these two works, but it is to be hoped that these scholars will engage with each others’ theorizations of black classicism in future publications.

Whatever future directions that the research in black classicism takes, it will be informed and enriched by Rankine’s study, which attempts to open up a serious dialogue between Classics and Black Studies, away from the polemics of the Black Athena debate. What the continuation of this dialogue might look like is suggested by two studies published in the following year (2007): Robert O’Meally’s *Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey* and Tracey Walters’s *African American Literature and the Classicist Tradition: Black Women Writers from Wheatley to Morrison*. In different ways, both authors speak from their respective disciplines to show what roles Classics can play in black mythopoiesis.

I turn to O’Meally first. In the essay ‘Of the Training of Black Men’, Du Bois wrote poignantly of conversing with the classics of literature across the colour line:

I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the colour line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling man and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out of the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension. (Du Bois [1903] 1965: 69)

A novel vision of what Classics across the colour line might look like is offered in the ‘Odysseus’ collages of Romare Bearden, initially displayed at the Cordier & Ekstrom Gallery in New York in the spring of 1977 and, thirty years on, the subject of an exhibition entitled ‘Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey’ at DC Moore Gallery in New York

(13 November 2007 to 5 January 2008).²⁶ Robert O'Meally's study *Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey* was published on the occasion of the latter exhibition. O'Meally's study comprises an introductory essay discussing Bearden's engagement with Homer's *Odyssey* in the larger context of Bearden's art, reproductions of each of the twenty 'Odysseus' collages and parallel commentaries to accompany these illustrations. In addition, the volume also reproduces twenty-three watercolours that Bearden produced following the exhibition: twenty of these watercolours reproduce scenes treated in the collages, but three contain additional scenes.

As one might expect from an art-house press, this is an extremely elegant publication. While the layout of text and images is a dream, the quality of O'Meally's text makes no small contribution to the volume's style. O'Meally brings his expertise in Jazz studies to the question of Homeric reception in Bearden's art.²⁷ One of the recurring arguments in this study is that we should understand Bearden's 'Odysseus' collages as a jazz-style collaboration with Homer.²⁸ For O'Meally, the jazz paradigm operates on many different levels simultaneously: in the first instance, Bearden is improvising on a myth received from Homer, just as Homer had improvised 'new ways of interpreting the received wisdom of very old tales' (12). Then O'Meally introduces the 'Harlem sense' of improvisation, in which improvisation is a collaborative endeavour. According to this sense, Bearden is an 'improviser' collaborating with Homer as with another artist: 'Bearden in this series of collages gets close enough to *The Odyssey* of Homer that the two artists play together like section-mates in a jazz band' (22). Then O'Meally suggests a Homeric, oral-derived 'call-response' jazz pattern, in which Bearden's audiences, like Homer's, are also in on the improvisation, completing the act (23). Finally, the hero of Bearden's collages is also seen to be a master improviser, as O'Meally gives a jazz sense to Odysseus' epithet *polutropos*, 'of many turns' (16–18). In fact, O'Meally himself emerges as an improvisatory author who shifts comfortably between different disciplines and approaches.

As evidence for the relevance of Odysseus's improvisation for black American culture, O'Meally cites the original, compound epithet 'jam-riff-clever Odysseus' coined in the novel *The Magic Keys* by Bearden's close friend and associate, Albert Murray (O'Meally 2007: 18).²⁹ The circulation of Odysseus as trickster figure within black culture is an example of Bearden's concept of 'the Prevalence of Ritual', according to which 'all people however distant from one another in terms of geography or historical moment, engage in repeated actions' (Ibid). There is a subtle difference here from the argument that black cultures have a

26 O'Meally notes that Bearden had had an earlier Homeric-themed exhibition, 'The Iliad: 16 variations by Romare Bearden', at Manhattan's Niveau Gallery in 1948 (O'Meally 2007: 11).

27 Robert O'Meally founded the Centre of Jazz at Columbia University and has published extensively on Jazz, including *Lady Day: The Many Faces of Billie Holiday* (1989); *The Jazz Singers* (1997); *Seeing Jazz* (1997); (as editor) *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture* (1998); and (as co-editor) *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies* (2003).

28 Compare the bardic character Billy Blue in Walcott's *The Odyssey: A Stage Version* (1993). 'Blind' Billy Blue is a black blues performer, who simultaneously evokes the African griot and Greek rhapsode. The play opens with Billy Blue performing a riff on Homer's *Odyssey*: 'Gone sing'bout that man because his stories please us, | Who saw trials and tempests for ten years after Troy. | I'm Blind Billy Blue, my main man's sea-smart Odysseus, | . . . '.

29 Albert Murray *The Magic Keys* (New York: Pantheon, 2005) p. 242. For Murray and Bearden's relationship, see Price and Price (2006: 37–9).

capacity for ritual and the repetition of rituals (e.g. in dance and song) that modern European culture has lost — the argument put forward by James Snead in his influential article ‘Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture’.³⁰ This latter argument has informed black classicism, especially in the version put forward by Wole Soyinka in *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976), that the shared background in ritual and polytheistic religion better equips Nigerian dramatists to engage with Greek tragedy than is the case with their European counterparts.³¹

To return to Du Bois’ vision of Classics ‘across the colour line’: O’Meally presents us with a portrait of Bearden working with Homer ‘with no question of subordination on either side’ (11–12). What is more, any racist colour hierarchy in which ancient Greece is white-washed is thoroughly subverted by Bearden’s colour palette. In the collage entitled ‘The Fall of Troy’ (1977), Bearden depicts black-figure warriors, their profiles like Benin sculptures, mounting a jetty, which is also a ramp into Troy, brandishing swords and spears. An innocuous-looking Trojan horse is stationed off-centre, on the right side of the collage, having disgorged its men, and the towers of Troy are blazing with jagged, blood-red flames shooting from their tops. In the foreground, the sea swarms with triremes bearing more black-figure warriors. Troy occupies the top half of the collage, painted in the iconic combination of green, red and black which had been adopted as the colours for the flags of many newly independent African nations. In O’Meally’s discussion of this scene, Bearden’s bold use of colour is one of the keys to interpretation, with striking or even dissonant colour combinations adding urgency and movement to the flatness of the collage. In a suggestive turn of phrase, Bearden spoke about liberating his colours so that they can ‘walk about the picture like free men’; O’Meally picks this up in the idea that Bearden’s colours in this collage are akin to ‘free men of colour’, free to shake up aesthetic meaning (2007: 32). O’Meally sees Bearden’s version of the fall of Troy as not a case of foreign armies clashing, but a civil war, ‘war as destruction of a great city, seedbed of life and culture — war thus as one of the great disasters that can befall the human family — war against humanity itself’ (*ibid.*). He also supplies a black American context for this collage:

Nor should it be forgotten that this is a collage from the 1970s by a black American artist whose work typically vibrates with social commentary. *The Fall of Troy* parallels the years of riot and rebellion in American cities as blacks protested and struggled for full citizenship in the divided house of the United States — still, according to many observers, resolving issues of its own long Civil War (*Ibid.*).

Bearden’s black-figured rendition of Homer’s *Odyssey* blends the aesthetic of Greek vase painting,³² itself in the business of ‘receiving’ Homer, with black American culture in what amounts to an ideological statement about the collage of all cultures. Conventional models of cultural diversity cannot begin to account for the intersection of cultures in Bearden’s collages; instead, O’Meally describes Bearden as ‘omni-cultural’ (19). This cumulative model in which cultures are piled on top of each other informs Derek Walcott’s classicism;

30 Snead (1990).

31 Soyinka (1976), although Soyinka is just as preoccupied with the differences and contrasts between Yoruba religion and Greek religion; see also Okpewho (1999); Wetmore (2002, Ch. 3); Djisenu (2007); and Goff and Simpson (2007: 74).

32 As O’Meally points out (20), Bearden was not the first African American artist to experiment with the black silhouettes on Greek black figure vases. O’Meally cites the example of Aaron Douglas.

speaking against the backdrop of a Bearden exhibition at Duke University in the Spring of 1995, Walcott described the New-World aesthetic of the Americas embodied in *Omeros* as a model of 'free-form choice . . . which owes to everything and is referential in that sense' (1997: 242).³³

Tracey Walters' study, *African American Literature and the Classicist Tradition* (2007) is also preoccupied with the role that Graeco-Roman classics play in the web of references available to writers in the black tradition in America. Walters is specifically interested in black women writers and the cultural politics of their turn to Graeco-Roman mythology. Within this large subject, Walters focuses on Gwendolyn Brooks, Toni Morrison and Rita Dove, supplementing her study of these authors with shorter discussions of Phillis Wheatley, Henrietta Cordelia Ray and Pauline Hopkins. In particular, Walters identifies the myths of Niobe, Demeter and Persephone, and Medea as recurrent mythological tropes in African American women's writing.

The Introduction ('Writing the Classics Black') rehearses the history of black classicism familiar from Ronnick 2005 and Rankine 2006, and relates it to Walters's particular interest in black women engaging with the classical tradition. The first chapter offers an overview of ancient and contemporary versions of the myths of Niobe, Demeter and Persephone, and Medea, emphasizing that different versions of each myth circulated in classical antiquity. Chapter 2 discusses the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers Phillis Wheatley, Henrietta Cordelia Ray and Pauline Hopkins as the original architects of the tradition of Black women's classical revision. Chapter 3 offers a detailed study of Gwendolyn Brooks's long poems *Annie Allen* (1949) and *In the Mecca* (1968) as revisions of the Demeter and Persephone myth.³⁴ Walters stresses the countercultural nature of Brooks's use of the classics at a time when the Black Arts Movement was turning away from what was perceived as white, western and classical mythology. Chapter 4 examines Toni Morrison's equivocal use of Graeco-Roman mythology in the novels *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Beloved* (1987) and *The Bluest Eye* (1970). It is equivocal, in the sense that any presence of Graeco-Roman mythology is counterbalanced by the black tradition, specifically black folklore, which is far and away the more dominant voice. In the case of *Song of Solomon*, Walters evokes the myth of Daedalus and Icarus; in the case of *Beloved*, the myth of Medea; and in the *Bluest Eye*, the myth of Demeter and Persephone. Several writers have discussed Morrison's engagement with Classics, particularly the dialogue with Euripides' *Medea* in *Beloved*; however, Walters's discussion of *The Bluest Eye* offers an original contribution to existing scholarship in demonstrating that Morrison is simultaneously engaging intertextually with revisions of the Demeter and Persephone myth in the work of other black women writers.³⁵ Finally, Chapter 5 explores the cultural politics of Rita Dove's independent approach to the classical tradition as one of the many traditions available to the writer who takes a universal approach

33 See Price and Price (2006: 96–7), who quote Walcott's lecture in their discussion of the narrative technique of Bearden's watercolour, 'Odysseus Rescued by a Sea Nymph', and the corresponding collage 'The Sea Nymph' (both 1977).

34 The collection *Annie Allen* includes a poem sequence entitled *The Anniad* for which Brooks invented a mock-heroic form called the anniad to celebrate the life of her protagonist, Annie. The title 'Anniad' alludes, subversively, to the *Iliad* and *Aeneid*.

35 For an overview of bibliography on Morrison's relationship with the Graeco-Roman classical tradition, see Roynon (2007b: 31, n. 1). Additional discussions include Rankine (2006: 103–18) and Roynon (2007a).

to her or his work. There are analogies here with O'Meally's comment about the 'omni-cultural' Bearden, and with Derek Walcott's classicism — a point that Walters makes (140). Walters focuses on Dove's play *The Darker Face of the Earth* (1994) and the volume of poems *Mother Love* (1995).

I cannot do justice to the full scope of Walters's study in this review, but discussion of this last chapter will help to illustrate her contribution in the context of scholarship on black classicism. At the centre of Dove's play is a tale of miscegenation on a slave plantation in the American South between a white mistress, Amalia, and one of her black slaves, Hector, resulting in a son called Augustus Newcastle who is given away and subsequently becomes his mother's lover when he returns as a slave to the plantation where he was born. Goff and Simpson's book contains a cogent chapter on *The Darker Face of the Earth* as an adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* in which this Oedipal tale of incest is a metaphor for both the violence done to society by the institution of slavery, which perverts family relationships, and the difficulty of tracing genealogies as a result of the deracination effected by the slave trade. As Goff and Simpson put it, 'The uncovering of slave stories may be considered oedipal in that the narratives resist telling: identities are lost on the journey of the Middle Passage, and the stories are suppressed because they are so devastating' (152). Walters stresses the Oedipal tropes in the play, but also appeals to the tradition of African American women's literature, relating the play's focus on incest and rape to the treatment of these themes in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (Walters 2007: Ch. 4). In Walters' reading, the myths of Niobe and Demeter and Persephone are also part of the mythological fabric of *The Darker Face of the Earth*, as Dove's radical depiction of Amalia, the slave mistress, sees her suffer the loss of her child, which was a common fate for enslaved women on the plantations:

Dove shows that despite her position of power, in some ways Amalia is as oppressed as her slaves. As a young girl she is forced into the standard arranged marriage, which results in a loveless and sexless union. Rather than adhering to the cult of womanhood and playing the role of sexually-frustrated plantation mistress, Amalia defies convention and empowers herself sexually, first by seeking out her own partner and second by defying the laws of the day and engaging in an affair with a slave. [...] Augustus' birth is a tragic moment for Amalia because in addition to losing Hector (the relationship ends after Hector thinks Augustus is stillborn) she also loses her son. Like the women featured in Wheatley's 'Niobe' or Brooks "In the Mecca," Amalia is depicted as the grieving mother who suffered separation from her child.³⁶

Walters's study demonstrates that the revisions of African American women constitute a significant chapter in the study of the feminist reception of Classics, and classical mythology in particular. Reading this book, I was reminded of the recent volume on classical myth and feminist thought edited by Vanda Zajko and Miriam Leonard. Writing about the prominence of Greek myth in feminist thought, Zajko and Leonard remark that:

Instead of creating new genealogies, many feminists have chosen to revivify ancient narratives to arm contemporary struggles. There is a tendency to overlook the strangeness of this choice. These myths are after all not only the products of an androcentric society, they can also be seen to justify its most basic patriarchal assumptions.³⁷

³⁶ Walters (2007: 149–50).

³⁷ Zajko and Leonard (2006: 2).

The addition of a black feminist perspective further complicates the strangeness of the move to Greek mythology and raises important questions about the cultural identity of feminist thought. Walters contends that African American women writers approach Classics as 'double minorities' by virtue of their race and gender (27). How usable are their powerful revisions for white women readers? For example, the black tradition clearly influenced Margaret Atwood's feminist revision of Homer's *Odyssey* in her *Penelopiad* (2005). The pivot for Atwood's revision is the maids in Odysseus' palace at Ithaca, whose rape and hanging put Odysseus on trial in her rewriting. Atwood's depiction of the maids takes its cue from the slave experience in America, as well as the infernal race crime of lynching.³⁸ In view of Walters's powerful argument that African American women writers have used the universal scope of Graeco-Roman mythology to communicate both the local and the universal significance of their own narratives, we should also allow that writers outside the black tradition, such as Atwood, can also contribute to black classicism.

Walters's study is particularly commendable for her constant return to the political and social contexts for the classical revisions of African American women writers. The discussions of rape in myth never lose sight of poverty, rape, racial and sexual discrimination as acute concerns for black women and for American society at large in the twentieth century. It is no exaggeration to call Walters's discussion of 'classical discourse as political agency' inspiring.³⁹ Again and again she shows how familiar classical myths have been signified anew by black women writers, extending the currency of these myths and contributing to a more intricate understanding of the dense web of cultural references in the black tradition. However, the analysis of the different revisions is sometimes uneven, with insightful and extremely well-informed criticism co-existing alongside sweeping generalizations which are not in fact borne out by Walters's nuanced discussion. When Walters writes on page 39 that, 'In 1773 Phillis Wheatley established the tradition of Black women's classical revision,' much is left unsaid about the controversial subject of how such traditions are invented. Or, on page 114, when Walters comments that 'Like other women in this study Morrison's goal is to present classical myth from the Black female perspective,' the bland descriptive content of this statement rings hollow in view of Walters's own discussion of the diverse and complex reasons that African American women writers have had for turning to classical myth.⁴⁰ But this is not to detract from the importance and originality of Walters's book.

The works reviewed above project an interesting future for black classicism. First and foremost, they demonstrate the importance of a cross-disciplinary approach to the study of the black classical tradition. Writing from outside Classics, both O'Meally and Walters show that the study of black classicism across disciplinary traditions contributes to a much richer, internally diverse model of the black classical tradition. Secondly, they reveal the need for the cross-cultural study of receptions of Classics in the literature of Africa and the black diaspora. One of the challenges for future research in this field is the task of negotiating the differences between 'black classicism' and '*classica africana*': the former is closely tied to the African American context, while the latter — which is not exactly

38 See e.g. Atwood's Chapter II ('The Chorus Line: A Rope-Jumping Rhyme'): Atwood (2005: 5–6).

39 The phrase in quotation marks is the title of Chapter 2 of Walters's study.

40 The publisher (Palgrave) should have done a better job of correcting the proofs of Walters's book: the repetition 'the the' occurs twice on page 1, and there are some typographical slips in the spelling of Greco-Roman names (e.g. 'Macenas' for 'Maecenas' on p. 5, and 'Procene' for 'Procne' on p. 109).

synonymous — evokes the role of Africa in the construction of black identities in the New World. Four of the works reviewed here are dedicated to the African American reception of Classics, as opposed to the reception of Classics in Africa or the black diaspora in its entirety. Potentially black classicism encompasses a much larger field and differential receptions; it will be interesting to see how tropes worked out in relation to the black experience in America interact with tropes in the arts of Africa, the Caribbean and Europe.⁴¹ Here again there are unlikely points of contact between the black tradition and the classical tradition, as black internationalism can be used to critique the universalism of the classical tradition, and vice versa.

Finally a plea for the inclusivity of black classicism. As I argued above, William Sanders Scarborough did not take up Classics in order to establish an exclusive black classicism, but rather to prove the point that classicism was not white. Black classicism does not propose an either/or model for the classical tradition, but a both/and model: the tradition is stronger for its ability to appeal to different cultural traditions which are anyway profoundly interconnected. All of the works reviewed here expose the crude fiction of a zero-sum model of culture in which one tradition's ascendancy is another tradition's demise.

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⁴¹ The Editor rightly pointed out to me that migration and its concomitant cosmopolitanisms mean that these cultural poles are diffuse, with the result that the arts in Europe increasingly reflect perspectives that are extra-European.

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