

# **Greek Tragedy and African American Theatre and Athenian Sun in an African Sky, by Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr**

***Black Dionysus: Greek Tragedy and African American Theatre***, by Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr., Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2003; 262 pp.; \$35.00 cloth.

***Athenian Sun in an African Sky***, by Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr., Jefferson

North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2002; 232 pp.; \$35.00 cloth. In *Black Dionysus: Greek Tragedy and African American Theatre*, Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr., relies on a wide range of methodologies in his historical and literary analysis of the use of Greek myths and the representation of Greek culture in African American theater. A major caveat heads his work: Wetmore cautions readers against the risks of interpretive perspectives that favor universality, for these ignore the violent colonialist underpinnings of adaptation. He also points to the historical recurrence of stereotypes and the racist and disempowering process by which African material is compared to, 'validated' by, and often only acknowledged because of its perceived emulative similarity to cultures cast as superior. It is precisely this fraught relationship, that is, the complicated negotiation between Greek culture, African, and African diasporan material that Wetmore seeks to understand in this study of African American theatre. As a professional theater artist and professor of theater history, Wetmore gives attention to both performance and text, and offers analyses that could classify as historical, literary, linguistic, and sociological to elucidate his understanding of African American theatrical adaptations of Greek material. Using the transformative myth of Dionysus and a linguistic understanding of the adjectival and metaphoric usages of "black," Wetmore insists that rather than perceiving African American theater as unproductively rooted in Greek material as has often—and incorrectly—been assumed, readers should disabuse themselves of these preconceived notions of classicist 'borrowings.' Rather, attention should be turned to the diversity that African and African American theater unequivocally represent, for heterogeneity, interculturality, and creativity define them both. *Black Dionysus* begins with the presentation of seven assumptions that inform Wetmore's work. These range from statements such as "African American theatre is not monolithic," and "African American theatre is intercultural theater" (5), to more considered comments on the relationship between the "liberation struggles of African peoples on the continent and African peoples in the diaspora"(6) and proposals regarding the most historically and ideologically sound way to treat the complexity of adaptation and intertextuality, particularly in regard to postcolonial material (7-10). While some of his assumptions seem somewhat self-evident, it is commendable that Wetmore takes the time to ensure that his readers understand his positionality and ideological methodology. Moreover, the norms he offers build a preparatory foundation that becomes increasingly pertinent as his book progresses. In his negotiation of the African diaspora's literary and cultural (re)presentation of dramatic texts and theatrical performance, Wetmore focuses on the ideas of transferral, transformation, appropriation, and critique as they are fundamental to determining a given text's adaptation, critique, or rejection of what is understood as literary tradition. He insists upon the compound, intertextual nature of literature and uses

the figure of Procrustes—a mythological rogue who metaphorizes adaptation and forceful transformation—to signal the procrustean richness and inherently ambiguous origins of classical literature. The Procrustes myth also reminds readers of the vastness and explicitly non-monolithic diversity of literature that ‘originates’ in Africa and the African diaspora as well as the violence of Eurocentric notions of adaptation, which far too often go ignored by critics. In order to consider the objectives and success of literary negotiations of African American theatrical creation and transformation, Wetmore aptly distinguishes three interpretive paradigms that constitute the theoretical angle of *Black Dionysus*. These elucidate what he calls the “Afro-Greek connection,” which refers to how “Greek culture has been used to engage African cultures in the New World” (4), and how African and African American theatrical texts ‘transculturates’ Greek tragedy. Taking their names from Greek myth, these proposed models of contact and “interaction between ancient Greek cultural material and contemporary African diasporan culture” (14) are the “Black Orpheus,” “Black Athena,” and “Black Dionysus” paradigms. “Black Orpheus,” is the understanding of African or African American texts and cultures only in terms of their derivation from, or their comparison to Greek materials. This metaphoric interpretation results in the problematic prioritization of the Greek context. The second paradigm, “Black Athena,” is a corrective and reappropriative stance that revises common conceptions of history and tradition by situating African origins as primary. In turn, it reverses the directionality postulated by the “Black Orpheus” paradigm and forces Greek material into a derivative and secondary role. The final way in which the bond between ancient Greece and contemporary diasporan Africa can be understood is through the “Black Dionysus” paradigm, which provides the central argument of Wetmore’s book, and most closely resembles his own analytical methodology. Reminding readers of the mythical stories that situate Dionysus as the god of transformation or change, Wetmore describes “Black Dionysus,” as a process of recontextualization, which also serves to critique the prioritization of ancient Greek culture over that of Africa and the African diaspora, while attributing greater value to intertextuality and cross-cultural borrowings. It aligns itself with the “Black Orpheus” model, in the sense that it too positions Greek material at the origin. However, it only does so metaphorically, in order to better present its own “counter-hegemonic and subversive” capacities. “Black Dionysus” offers a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of intertextual borrowings than the “Black Athena” model; it becomes a paradigm that takes a post-Afrocentric stance to the African diasporan theater of the New World, while also interrogating the facile critical tendency towards a prioritization of Greek origins.

Though the argument meanders slightly, the most problematic aspects of *Black Dionysus* are stylistic and editing issues. For example, readers frequently encounter absent and misplaced apostrophes, contradictory and ambiguous referents, repetitive sentence structures, and even a few incomplete sentences that trail off *in medias res* or lack punctuation. Needless to say, though these errors are minor, they are distracting and combine to occasionally obfuscate the author’s meaning. A greater problem, however, is Wetmore’s stylistic tendency towards reiteration and repetition. While he succeeds in pairing his argument with numerous examples, he undermines his efforts by using an almost identical linguistic register and syntax in his discussion of various texts. Consequently, some of his most important points are unnecessarily unclear due to frequent internal repetitions that create disorganization, incoherence, and even contradiction. Take, for example,

the following passage from the first chapter of the book, which critiques the over sexualization of black bodies by analyzing the myth of Venus and the offensive reification of Saartjee Baartman—a Khoikhoi woman who was exhibited and forced to perform in shows and fairs in early 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Her objectification and mistreatment continued even after her death, as her body was dissected and once again put on display: There was also an [sic] historic figure, Saartjee Baartman. [...], a South African woman who was known as ‘The Hottentot Venus.’” (33); “Baartman was placed on public display because of her unique physical characteristics, [...]” (33); “Baartman was an African woman who was placed on public display because of her enormous buttocks and enlarged genitalia, which were seen as common in African women and emblematic of African female sexuality by Europeans at the time” (34); “Baartman was placed on public display under the name ‘The Hottentot Venus,’ suggesting that she was an example of African standards of beauty. She was also regarded as a sexual object. (34) While the example of Baartman does illustrate the connection between gender, performance, reification, and gender, Wetmore could have presented her case more successfully had he given more attention to the performative aspects of her exploitation that directly correspond to his thesis, yet which he omits. His point would also have been more effectively made had he written less redundantly. Unfortunately, nearly every sentence he proffers on Baartman in just a few pages evidences the unnecessary repetition that betrays the larger problems with organization that are found throughout the rest of his monograph. *Black Dionysus* builds on Wetmore’s *The Athenian Sun in an African Sky: Modern African Adaptations of Classical Greek Tragedy*, which offers a discussion of the appropriation of Greek culture and tragedy in African theater, and “the use of Greek tragedy as a model, influence, and inspiration by African theatre artists” (2). *The Athenian Sun* explores two tightly entwined trends that Wetmore continues to analyze in *Black Dionysus*: first, the connection between Greek roots and the translation and adaptation of myths and tragedies to modern theater; second, the role that Afrocentric classicism has in regard to modern theater’s inevitable dependency on a “matrix of interpretation” grounded in Greek material. These lead Wetmore to the third, and fundamental consideration that during the 1960s—the period in which many African countries gained their independence—the increasing proximity of Greek tragedy and African theater allowed plays to become the performative spaces in which modern African theater negotiated its relationship to colonialism and to colonial modes of interpretation. All of these ideas are reiterated in *Black Dionysus* as well.

In many regards *The Athenian Sun* offers a more successful argument than *Black Dionysus*. Its achievement can be gauged primarily in that it is more focused and offers more sustained literary analyses than does *Black Dionysus*. *Black Dionysus* offers an extensive survey of dramatic texts that is certainly useful, and Wetmore’s expansive critical repertoire is indeed impressive. Nevertheless, his rather elliptical treatment of so many works does not allow him to do the close and insightful interpretations of theatrical texts and performances that he does best. Similarly, while the constant use of classical metaphors is initially compelling, as his book continues, these references grow increasingly muddled and come across as rather arbitrary. His use of more obscure mythical figures to illustrate minor details could be eliminated entirely. Moreover, not every phenomenon should be reducible to Greek culture, nor every text reducible to a Greek Ur-text. This is precisely the argument that Wetmore is making, yet he somewhat defeats his own intentions by grasping, like Tantalus, toward too many oblique

texts, intertexts, myths, and metaphors that ultimately elude him. These reservations notwithstanding, both the attention and valorization that Wetmore gives to African diasporan theater, and the energy and passion with which he argues, are welcome contributions. The sprinted tone of *Black Dionysus* encourages readers to familiarize themselves with the numerous plays that Wetmore mentions, and to reflect upon intertextuality, the benefits and risks of appropriation, and the multicultural potential of African American theater in new and invigorating ways.

Alani Rosa Hicks-Bartlett

University of California, Berkeley

Departments of Romance Languages and Literatures

Gender and Women's Studies