# Orpheus and the Racialized Body in Brazilian Film and Literature of the Twentieth Century

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**Abstract** This paper argues for the significance of Orpheus as a racialized body in Brazil. A consistent feature of Orpheus in Brazil throughout the twentieth century is his blackness. This is the case in each of the three variations of the Orpheus myth in twentieth – century Brazilian drama and literature: Vinicius de Moraes' play, *Orfeu da Conceição* (*Orpheus of Conception*), Marcel Camus' *Black Orpheus*, and Carlos Diegues's *Orfeu*. Thus Brazilian Orpheus fit into a context not only of twentieth – century classical reception in Brazil and throughout the modern world, but also in discussions of Afrodescendent communities in Brazil and the Americas.
**Key Words** Race; Black Orpheus; Classical Reception; Afrodescendent communities; Brazilian literature

> The film, a groundbreaker of sorts due to its mostly black, Brazilian cast, had been made in the fifties. The storyline was simple: the myth of the ill – fated lovers Orpheus and Eurydice set in the favelas of Rio during carnival, in Technicolor splendour, set against scenic green hills, the black and brown Brazilians sang and danced and strummed guitars like carefree birds in colourful plumage. About halfway through the movie I decided I'd seen enough, and turned to my mother to see if she might be ready to go. But her face, lit by the blue glow of the screen, was set in a wistful gaze. At that moment I felt as if I were being given a window into her heart, the unreflective heart of her youth. I suddenly realised that the depiction of the childlike blacks I was now seeing on the screen, the reverse image of Conrad's dark savages, was what my mother had carried with her to Hawaii all those years before, a reflection of the simple fantasies that had been forbidden to a white, middle – class girl from Kansas, the promise of another life: warm, sensual, exotic, different. (Barack Obama, 44th President of the United States of America, in *Dreams of My Father*)

In the quote above, Barack Obama, the 44th President of the United States of America, talks about his experience watching *Black Orpheus* with his mother. Son of a Kenyan father and a white American mother, Obama, who complains about his mother's "wistful gaze" upon the "childlike blacks" in Camus' 1959 film, misses the extent to which—or resents the imposition through which —he himself is black

Orpheus: a gifted body, at risk of being torn apart under the gaze and desires of others. Obama's quote does not only convey the lasting import of Camus' *Black Orpheus*, as a film with such far-reaching influence as to be discussed in the biography of an American president. But Obama's quote also suggests the timelessness of the idea of black Orpheus: again, Obama is himself the racialized body, at the mercy of an external gaze to maintain its integrity.

Camus' *Black Orpheus* is notable not only for a black Diaspora, which includes an American president, but it also bears fruit in its native Brazilian soil. A sizable percentage of the Brazilian population claims African heritage – by some estimations, 50% of the population, or 100 million people (Page 1995). The film, moreover, has a rich back-story within its Brazilian framework. From the opening credits, Camus' movie claims a genealogy in Vinicius de Moraes' 1956 *Orfeu da Conceição* (*Orpheus of the Conception*), a play so influential in itself as to be restaged in its original city of São Paulo in 2010. In 1999, Brazilian filmmaker Carlos Diegues remade the Camus film, and he claimed to re-root black Orpheus in its original soil. In its opening credits, Diegues' *Orfeu*, like Camus' film, claims to be based on Moraes' play. Outside of the movies and theater, a number of books within and outside of Brazil take Orpheus as its organizing trope, including political scientist Michael Hancard's study of black social movements in Brazil, titled *Orpheus and Power* (1995).

A study of black Orpheus in Brazil, of which Camus 1959 movie is the principal vehicle, is in order. With the rise of classical reception studies specifically interested in non-traditional and postcolonial frameworks for the Classics, there is an unprecedented context for such a study. The revival of Moraes' film in 2010 closes a chapter on the artistic projects of the 1950s in Brazil, but it also suggests that the power of the symbol of black Orpheus in Brazil is no weaker today that it was over half a decade ago.

## Black Orpheus and Postcolonial Reception Studies

During the past decade, a number of scholars have created a context for reading the legacy of Greece and Rome outside of the traditional frameworks. In *Classics & Colonialism*, which was published in 2005 but grew out of a 2001 conference at the Institute of Classical Studies in London, Barbara Goff argues that Classics as a discipline "has played a role both in imperialist and colonialist movements and in the opposing movements of resistance" (6). In the same volume, Lorna Hardwick reflects upon her Research Project on the Reception of Classical Texts, at the Open University. Hardwick asserts that analysis of "over 700 recent productions of Greek drama" leads her to conclude that "there is a pattern of features that suggest a distinctive role for classical material in provoking awareness and transformation of cultural identities" (107). My own *Ulysses in Black: Ralph Ellison, Classicism, and African American Literature*, is now only one among a number of projects interested in the role of Classics among African American authors, the United States being a not-so-unique, postcolonial setting.[1] These projects include Tracey L. Walters' *African American Literature and the Classical Tradition: Black Women Writers from Wheatley to Morrison* (2007), and

*African American Writers & Classical Tradition*, by William W. Cook and James Tatum (2010). Like their counterparts, black American authors sometimes "pull" the classical idea or text to their own use, to borrow Goff's metaphor, as opposed to the classical object "*pushing* its way through time to a contemporary period" (13). In the case of African American classicism, writers who self-identify as black take up the Classics as a mode of canny expression.[2]

Although Goff's pulling model applies to any number of postcolonial receptions, Brazil presents a curious anomaly, as a postcolonial country where black identity is riddled with unique complexities.[3] Unlike the works within the United States Cook and Tatum, myself and others present, *Black Orpheus* was not the product of a black Brazilian artist and, some argue, not a Brazilian film (Stam 1997). Yet in *Black Orpheus* we find a product of classical reception that enters broader discourses of race, nation, and cultural identity. The significance of the 1959 film is clear from black Orpheus' pre-Brazilian genealogy, with Jean Paul Sartre's essay and the eponymous magazine; the musical and theatrical precursor in Brazil, with Vinicius de Moraes' *Orfeu da Conceição*, which explicitly called for a black actor as Orpheus; the reprise of a black Orpheus in Brazilian filmmaker Carlos Diegues' 1999 *Orfeu*; and the 2010 revival of Moraes' play in São Paulo, Brazil.

Marcel Camus' 1959 film*Black Orpheus* challenges the model of the Classics within a postcolonial context in a number of ways and therefore demands our attention. Camus' movie is an award-winning masterpiece; it won the Palme d'Or in Cannes in 1959, and the Oscar and Golden Globe for Best Foreign Film in 1960. The film presents a black (Negro) Orpheus, in a *favela*, a Brazilian hillside ghetto, in Rio de Janeiro. The "de-center[ing]" that occurs, however, to borrow Lorna Hardwick's language regarding postcolonial classicism, wherein the "text is liberated for reinterpretation" (Goff 109), is different from what we might experience in the African, Caribbean, or American contexts discussed above. In the first place, there is the problem of a French filmmaker presenting a Negro Orpheus in Brazil. *Film Quarterly* reviewer Ernest Callenbach (1960) laments the film's "exoticism" and its "travelogue" feel. And as Robert Stam charts in *Topical Multiculturalism: A Comparative History of Race in Brazilian Cinema and Culture* (1997), *Black Orpheus* engendered some disgust among Brazilians. Caetano Veloso, the Brazilian, Tropicalia guitarist who played a major role in the remake, *Orfeu* (1999), claimed that he "detested Camus' film because it depicts the *favela* in an allegorical way, as a perfect society in which only death is bothersome" (Stam 51)[4]. A caption during the film's opening credits tells the viewer that it is "based on the play by [Brazilian poet] Vinicius de Moraes," a claim that Carlos Diegues' 1999 film would also make. But questions of setting and character remain.

Whose Orpheus is black Orpheus? Is his genealogy the apparent tie to French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre's reading of Negritude poetry, the ubiquity of which is clear in the essay's multiple publications, from 1948-2001? Is black Orpheus Brazilian, and if so, is Brazil a postcolonial scene for classical reception? The simplicity and elegance of Camus' *Black Orpheus* belies the complex set of problems it presents vis-à-vis classical reception and the representation of race in Brazil.

As Rainer Maria Rilke's "Sonnets to Orpheus" (1922) suggests, Orpheus has a powerful regeneration in the 20th century. Rilke's is "the most far-reaching adaptation of the Orpheus myth since antiquity" (Cook and Tatum 346), although it certainly would not be the last. Tennessee Williams would return to the Orpheus myth in his 1945 play *Orpheus Descending*, and Jean Cocteau's film *Orphée* (1949) gives Camus a cinematic precedent for the myth. In his study of modern adaptations of the myth, Charles Segal reminds us of Orpheus as a fertility figure, whose "descent restores a lost vitality to the earth" (Segal 157).

Camus' film is clearly indebted to Cocteau's *Orphée* and its European and American antecedents leading into the 1950s, but Moraes' *Orfeu da Conceição* provides the immediate Brazilian framework. In his essay on Moraes' play, Celso de Oliveira makes a compelling case for the preoccupation with Orpheus in Europe and America after World War II, regenerative possibilities as the myth's central concern. Segal sees in the Orpheus adaptations a modern landscape with "trains, stations, and towns, but characters in effect go nowhere" (Segal 172). These themes migrate into Brazil, itself on the cusp of modernity. Claude Lévi-Strauss' 1955 study of Brazil, *Tristes Tropiques*, affirms the relationship between French and Brazilian urban, aesthetic, and intellectual life. Although Lévi-Strauss does not directly name Orpheus, his analysis of the Brazilian *favelas* deploys similar tropes to that of Sartre's black Orpheus. Lévi-Strauss observed that in Rio de Janeiro "the poor were perched high up on the hillsides…where a population of Negroes clad in well-washed rags composed lively guitar-melodies" (88). Indeed, such Negroes and their "lively guitar-melodies" feature prominently in Camus' *Black Orpheus*. During the same period of the 1950s, literary critic Waldo Frank expressed amazement at "the beautiful dancing and music-making of the *favelandos*" (Stam 168); the black dancers were likened to a Greek chorus. Within this context, Brazilian poet Moraes adapts the Orpheus myth for his native soil, and he sets his play *Orfeu da Conceição* in "um morro carioca," a town of Rio de Janeiro (Moraes 1960).

Apart from its French and broader European and American contexts, Brazilian intellectuals were crafting their own postcolonial identity in the early part of the twentieth century, and indigenous themes and tropes also have relevance to Camus' film. During the "Week of Modern Art" (*A Semana de Arte Moderna*) on February 11-18, 1922, in São Paulo, Brazilian poet Oswaldo de Andrade declared that the task of the artist in Brazil was that of a symbolic cannibalism (*omophagia*). Brazilian artists were to consume all influences, national and foreign. Andrade was suggesting that, given the stories about the Tupí peoples of Brazil eating their enemies in order to incorporate their strengths, Brazilians had a native gift of assimilating global influences and creating something new. Such regeneration is the Orphic mode, as the quote above from Segal (on Orpheus restoring the earth's lost vitality) reminds us. Dismemberment (*sparagmos*) is of course a central issue in the Orpheus myth, and this is consonant with the Brazilian modernist trope. Brazilian poet Jorge de Lima's *Invenção de Orfeu* (1952) creates an "indigenous palimpsest" in his allusions to earlier traditions, argues Luísa Sá (2000). Lima consumes Luís Vas de Camões' epic *Os Lusíadas* (*The Lusiads*), the Homeric, Dantesque poem from 1572 (which in turn

had consumed classical epic). Camões' poem is a foundational text of Brazilian literature and is in part responsible for the promulgation of the idea of Tupí as anthropophagi. Lima's poem shifts perspectives, and Orpheus is the Indian under threat from the Portuguese. Lima makes possible Orpheus as a symbol for the Brazilian subaltern. In Lima's poem, the colonized subject does not speak but is incorporated into a broader metaphorical, indigenous body. As we see, therefore, in Brazilian literature of the early 20th century, the local artist is to consume its indigenous land, Europe, Africa, and others, artistically dismembering these bodies and reconstituting them through palimpsest and montage (Sá 2000). This process is also evident in film (Stam 1997).

## Is Brazil a Postcolonial Setting for Classical Reception?

As a postcolonial setting, Brazil holds many of the paradoxes of the United States of America, and political scientist Anthony W. Marx, in his book *Making Race and Nation* (1998) finds the comparison between these two nations—and including South Africa—quite useful. Brazil shares the American status of former colony, a history of the Transatlantic Slave Trade of Africans to the New World, and the legacy of an apartheid system, or at least second – class citizenship, after the emancipation of slaves.[5] Brazil's colonial status was among the most complex in the Americas. Founded as a Portuguese colony in 1500, Brazil resembled other American trading posts and competed with French, Dutch, Spanish, and English colonies in sugar production (Marx 1998). Brazil met the challenges that the rise of the Dutch East Indian Company in the early 1600s presented with the discovery of gold later in that century, a find that gave buoyancy to the Brazilian economy throughout the 1700s (Marx 1998). Despite similarities with other colonies, Brazil was unique in being the only American site of a European monarchy.[6] With Napoleon's advance into Lisbon in 1807, the Portuguese king Dom João IV "acceded to British demands that they escort him, his courts, fleet, treasury, and even a printing press, into exile in Brazil" (Marx 32). Until gaining its complete independence from Portugal in 1822, Brazil had the status of quasi-colony, quasi – monarchy. Andrew Marx best characterizes this condition:

> With its royal presence, emergent Brazilian nationalism shifted from being anti-Portuguese to embracing a localized monarchy. The Brazilian Empire was consolidated around the symbol of the "moderating power" of the crown. The result was a remarkable degree of unity and stability, reinforced by state-controlled exports and British support for its trading partner. (Marx 32)

Brazil's prosperity owed much, of course, to the presence of African slaves. Brazil imported its first African slaves in 1538, almost a century before blacks were brought to Virginia in 1619. Brazil had the most extensive and longstanding role in the Transatlantic Slave Trade. As historian Joseph A. Page argues, "in the course of three centuries about 3. 5 million blacks (six times the number brought to the United States) survived the ordeal of the Atlantic crossing" (Page 61). Despite Portuguese

claims regarding the mildness of slavery in their empire (Marx 1998), circumstances in Brazil resembled that of other colonies. Notwithstanding exceptional cases, such as the sculptor Antônio Francisco Lisboa (1738 – 1814), or Chica da Silva (1732 – 1796), who so enamored a Portuguese official that he built her a lake (Page 1995), slaves worked sugar and coffee plantations and endured harsh conditions in the mines of Minas Gerais. There were a number of slave revolts, and runaway slaves established *quilombos*, independent communities such as the Republic of Palmares (Andrews 2004). As historian George Reid Andrews sees, the example of Haiti stunned the ruling classes across the Caribbean and Latin America, and "in 1823 the governor [of Bahia] ordered 'a general attack on all quilombos known to exist' in the province" (Andrews 75). The slave trade to Brazil continued even after the British Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807, and the number of slaves brought to the port of Bahia, in Salvador, actually peaked between 1846 – 1850, with numbers approaching 10,000 slaves per year (de Queirós Mattoso 1986). Brazil was the last country in Latin America to abolish slavery, in 1888, twenty three years after the Civil War in the United States of America.

By the time of full independence in 1889, Brazilians had already held a degree of independence from the local monarchy that ruled from 1822, and only 5% of the population were slaves in 1889 (down from 25% in 1823) (Ronaldo Vainfas, *Dictionário do Brasil Imperial*, Rio). Blacks nevertheless struggled, and second – class citizenship ensued. Historian Anthony Marx traces the disparate treatment of blacks and whites in the early part of the twentieth century (Marx 1991), and there is clear evidence of mistreatment—police brutality, curfews, and the rise of ghettoes — in public spaces (Merrell 2005).

The plight of Brazilian blacks from 1888 to the present is as perplexing as the country's strange history. In the first place, a practice of importing European labor in the early twentieth century took hold across Latin America, and especially in Brazil. Brazilian leaders saw the "transfusion of new blood" (Andrews 119) as the path forward. As Page argues, Brazilians "were willing to lay major blame for what they perceived as their own national inferiority on the presence of a large black and mulatto population" (69). While in the United States, leaders grappled with segregation and the prospects of black emigration to Africa post – Emancipation, Brazilians saw a problem in widespread poverty among Afro – descendents, black ghettos, and independent black practices that had to be repressed. Brazilian intellectuals felt the issue would correct itself through racial mixing (Andrews 2004). By the 1930s, the ideas of sociologist Gilberto Freyre began to take hold: Brazil was to be a racial paradise, in which three main groups, Brazil's indigenous populations, blacks, and Europeans (primarily Portuguese), blended into a unique culture. As Marx argues, however, there are a number of indicators that the myth of racial democracy was just that—a useful fiction:

> Brazilian culture remains inclusive. But recent scholarship has established that the difference in socioeconomic status between mulattoes and blacks is insignificant in comparison with the relative privilege of whites, whose average income

was about twice that for nonwhites both in 1960 and in 1976. (Marx 68)

In *Blacks and Whites in São Paulo, Brazil*: 1888 – 1988 (1991), Andrews charts practices of discrimination where only persons of "good appearance" (*boa aparência*), namely, whites, were hired for certain jobs. Low number of blacks in professional fields as compared to whites and mixed – race Brazilians (*pardos*) in the period that Andrews charts is astounding. By 1995, Page was able to write that Brazil "has the largest black population outside of Africa" (4). But paradoxes abound: "The ease with which individuals of different racial backgrounds intermingle has served to obscure recognition of the existence of a subtle and not – so – subtle racism that makes it difficult for blacks to enjoy the same political, social, and economic opportunities as whites" (Page 11).

The plight of the African in the Brazilian body politic has thus been one of struggle and resistance (Butler 2000). The symbolic value given to black identity in the main—in candomblé festivals, African drumming, and the racial democracy myth, generally—belies the reality of the lives of many blacks in Brazil. These Afro – descent practices, at one time illegal (Merrell 2005), are incorporated into the broader Brazilian citizenry, after their*sparagmos*. But black voices remain. Attempts to address the complexities of black identity can be found in literature and the arts, as Emanuelle K. F. Oliveira shows (2008).

Thus black identity in Brazil has been that of the 'dismemberment' of their cultural contributions, and resistance to assimilation. Orpheus is an ideal trope. Given these complexities, the depiction of the Afro – descendent community in Camus' *Black Orpheus* is troublesome, outside of Brazil, as Obama's quote from the epigram examples, and within it, as I have outlined here. My own experience watching Camus' film echoes Obama's and is, in fact, resonant with a genealogy of the trope of black Orpheus, which predates Camus' 1959 film. As a figure, black Orpheus embodies the paradox of Afro – descent identity since the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade.

## A Genealogy of *Black Orpheus*

> After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second – sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self – consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the reflection of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double – consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two – ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*)

Du Bois' observation about the Negro in America in 1903 has far – reaching applica-

tion. The trope of black Orpheus is consonant with Du Bois' notion of double – consciousness. Black Orpheus, from the inception, is a way of "looking at oneself through the eyes of others;" an invention of Jean – Paul Sartre, black Orpheus was never an invention of any person of African descent. Yet black Orpheus is in so many ways an appropriate symbol. How could the person of Afro – descent, in the New World, be anything but a "two – ness," an entity that embodies African practices alongside European identity, classical and modern? And yet, like Orpheus, the person of Afro-descent struggles to reconcile these "warring ideals" within a "dark body whose dogged strength alone keep it from being torn asunder." Orpheus' failure is that of the Negro in the American context. As troublesome as was Sartre's invention, it was one that would reverberate into the 21st century, at least in Brazil.

### *Orphée noir*

In the 1948 essay that introduces Léopold Sédar Senghor's anthology of negritude poetry, Jean – Paul Sartre invents black Orpheus. The essay was reprinted in 1949 (*Présence Africaine*, *Situations*, *III*), and the translation that appears in Bernasconi's 2001 volume is that of John MacCombie, published in *The Massachusetts Review*, in 1964/5, as "Black Orpheus." If Wole Soyinka's later complaints that the name "Black Orpheus" bothered him are any testimony (Jeyifo 2001), Sartre's was an inconvenient conception. At the same time, black Orpheus could not be ignored.

Soyinka's comments on the mid – century black Orpheus echo Obama's on the filmic figure, which he watched at the end of the century. As with Du Bois' "dark body," each black Orpheus is conceived through the "two – ness" of a white gaze upon black corporeality and action. In Sartre's essay, the European philosopher argues that negritude poetry, as black – voiced for black audiences, was not intended for whites. Yet Sartre dares, almost voyeuristically, to watch, and to react. He asks his (white) reader, "Did you think that when they raised themselves up again, you would read adoration in the eyes of these heads that our fathers had forced to bend down to the very ground" (115)? The specific essence of Negritude poetry is consistent with an existential approach to our existence; Negritude poetry is a "*becoming conscious*" of the experiences of Africans in European hands. For Sartre, Negritude poetry is not only specific, but it is also exceptional. With Marxism as a counterpoint to his existentialism, Sartre asserts that forging meaning is for blacks different from the processes through which whites craft themselves.

Sartre's Marxism is another feature of his analysis that resonates in the Brazilian context. As Kim Butler observes, Brazilian Marxism threatens to unravel Afro – descent cultural identity in South America's largest country (Butler 2000). ForSartre, blacks need this precondition of cultural identity before they can take part in broader national or economic projects: "The unity which will come eventually, bringing all oppressed peoples together in the same struggle, must be preceded in the colonies by what I shall call the movement of separation or negativity" (118). Blacks must first craft themselves as individuals and as a people (separate, a negation of whites)—even without a language that corresponds with, for example, Irish for the person of Irish extraction (Sartre's analogy)—before they should join the movement against

broader oppression. Sartre's paternalism is, of course, astounding, from any perspective, but especially given his essay's position in the context of poetry actually written by persons of African descent. What saves Sartre, however, is precisely the sense of blackness as an existential reality, one that later philosopher Lewis R. Gordon sees as an irrepressible response to lived experience (Gordon 2000).

Sartre offers several ideas that would come to be recurrent tropes for Brazil's black Orpheus. He assert a specific black identity separate and distinct from (a negation of) whiteness. In poetry, the negation of whiteness comes in the inversion or redeployment of symbols, beginning with the valences of black and white. Sartre quotes poems that not only privilege the idea of blackness but in fact seem to hone in on it with obsessive focus. The fixation on black bodies, Du Bois' "dark bod[ies]," render them objects of fetishism, and we see this again in Camus' film. Within the Senghor volume, Sartre cites Senghor's "Femme Noir" with its "naked woman, black woman," the "firm fleshed ripe fruit" and "somber ecstasies of black wine;" Léon – G. Damas' "Limbe" pleas to "give me back my black dolls," and so forth, until the symbolic value of blackness, heretofore one of death and decay, dominates, henceforth sensuality and childlike play (Sartre 2001).

The symbolism of black bodies finds expression through music for black Orpheus, "Orphée noir." If inversion and redeployment of blackness as symbol dominate the poetic language, musicality is to convey a cultural essence. In Sartre's words, "rhythm cements the multiple aspects of the black soul, communicates its Nietzschian lightness with heavy Dionysian intuitions; rhythm - tam – tam, jazz, the reverberation of these poems - represents the temporality of negro*existence*" (133).

The Dionysian symbolism of black Orpheus troubled Soyinka, and the Brazilian artists would again deploy it. Along with Antônio Carlos Jobim, Moraes not only composed music for his play, but he brought Bossa nova to the world scene through his work on Camus' film. Samba, that form which takes its rhythms from Africa, is the driving force of the music in the movie. Diegues' 1999 film extends the local, Brazilian response to the mythological theme of Orpheus the poet, Orpheus the musician, not only through Caetano Veloso's Tropicalia, but also through Samba, Afro – reggae, and Brazilian hip hop, as the "Enredo" or theme – song from the film's soundtrack declares.

Because black bodies and their musicality are transplants from an African homeland, Africa is the culminating trope of Sartre's Orphée noir. Africa is the Eurydice that the Negritude poet loves with all his being but cannot lay hold of. Sartre makes only a handful of explicit references to the title character of his essay, but they are illuminating. The symbolism of the Orpheus myth permeates Sartre's essay. The Negritude poet, needless to say, is Orpheus. Negritude is the lost love that these poets "wish to fish for in their abyssal depths" (119). Africa is "phantom flickering like flame, between being and nothingness" (120). The symbol now played and replayed, Sartre hones in on his theme: "I shall call this poetry 'Orphic' because the negro's tireless descent into himself makes me think of Orpheus going to claim Eurydice from Pluto" (121). The "descent into" oneself brings Africa within the dark body; it is no longer an external or exterior reality. The dark body does not migrate

geographically to reconcile the "two – ness" of its identity. Rather, it travels inward. But this descent threatens to unravel a Brazilian integrity, where *ordo e progresso*, "order and progress," is achieved not inwardly, but in the main.

Sartre's ultimate reference to Orpheus in the essay is Hegelian, and it is worth citing it here at length because it returns us to death and loss, which point to the impossibility of Orpheus as a sustainable symbol for blackness – or rather it is blackness, as cultural identity, that might be unsustainable:

> In fact, Negritude appears as the minor moment of a dialectical progression: the theoretical and practical affirmation of white supremacy is the thesis; the position of Negritude as an antithetical value is the moment of negativity. But this negative moment is not sufficient in itself, and these blacks who use it know this perfectly well; they know that it aims at preparing the synthesis or realization of the human in a raceless society. Thus Negritude is for destroying itself, it is a passage and not an outcome, a means and not an ultimate end. At the moment that every black Orpheus most tightly embraces this Eurydice, they feel her vanish from between their arms. (137)

Sartre's paradoxical assertions underscore the ambivalence and unsustainability of racial identity. In the first place, Hegelian synthesis brings us to the "realization of the human in a raceless society," which is exactly the goal of the Brazilian body politic, from Freyre onward. In Diegues' 1999 film, black Orpheus is part of a rainbow of poverty. Yet this "order and progress," for whatever its worth, comes through a *sparagmos*; as with Sartre's Negritude, which is "for destroying itself," Afro-descent identity in Brazil has to be broken apart for Brazilian identity to hold. At the same time, Brazilian modernity needs black Orpheus "tightly embrac[ing]" Eurydice. How else does Brazil distinguish itself as a country, without the incorporation of its many parts?

**Brazil's Black Orpheus.**

Within this Brazilian context, the filmmaker Camus crafts *Black Orpheus*, a film that is as troublesome to the category of postcolonial reception as is Brazil to that of postcolonial nation. Race complicates matters even further. As Marx posits, "nations make race," and the role that Brazilian nationalism played in making *Black Orpheus* a racial film should not be underestimated (Butler 2000). Notwithstanding some of the negative responses of Brazilian artists to the French – made film, which I have already touched upon, Camus' movie does declare its indebtedness to Vinicius de Moraes' play from the very outset, as we have seen. As Stam asserts, *Black Orpheus* is a Brazilian film (Stam 1997). It is necessary to delve into the performance history of *Orfeu da Conceição*, which premiered in São Paulo, Brazil, in 1956. Moraes had published a version of the play in 1953, and Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer designed the set for the 1956 production (de Oliveira 2002). Niemeyer is the embodiment of Brazilian modernity, and he was the principle architect of Brasilia, a city that was built in four years (1956 – 1960) as capital and seat of the federal government. At the age of 102

in November, 2010, Niemeyer has a monumental place in Brazilian culture, and his commentary extends beyond architecture. (Neimeyer has been quoted as comparing his buildings to the exotic bodies of Brazilian women.) His involvement in Moraes' play is noteworthy, as it reinforces the relationship between race and nation (Marx 1998). This background extends into the 21st century, with the 2010 revival of Moraes' play in São Paulo, Brazil.

The Brazilian Orpheus as a racial body is not entirely Camus' creation, but rather it owes to the specific spirit of Moraes's play, with its Sartrean genealogy. More specifically, the Brazilian formulation of the racial paradise requires a bidirectional pull: In one direction the nation claims "order and progress" through the incorporation of all of its historical parts, again, blacks, Europeans, and Indians (Butler 2000). In the move toward a national identity entirely its own, however, Brazil required the distinctive contributions of each of its three constitutive groups. So, for example, practices that had been outlawed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, such as the religious practices of Afro – descendent communities, Candomblé and Umbanda, are today significant features of Brazil's industry of ethnic tourism (Andrews 122).

In this context, the Brazilian Moraes, not the French filmmaker Camus, insisted upon a black Orpheus. Moraes, who, like Niemeyer, was of European descent, gives specific instructions about the characters in*Orfeu da Conceição*: "all of the characters of the tragedy should normally be represented by actors of the negro race" (*tôdas as personagens da tragédia, deven ser normalmente representadas por atores da raça negra*).[7] Certainly a symbolic blackness is at the heart of Moraes' modernism. As we see from the play's opening scene, blackness is the obscurity of night, where danger lurks and secrets can be kept. Darkness is where the moon enchants: "There are so many perils in this life for the passionate, especially when a moon suddenly surges and sinks from the sky, as if forgotten" (19 – 20). These lines are quoted verbatim in Diegues' 1999 film, further evidence that the discussion of Camus' film must extend through the 20th century.

The symbol of blackness in the play converges onto black bodies, as Moraes' stage directions militate, but we also see this in the suggestion of Afro-descendent religious practices, from which Camus draws for*Black Orpheus*. In Moraes' three-act play, a character simply named A Dama Negra ("Black Woman") reports Eurydice's death to Aristeu the beekeeper at the end of act 1. Although Moraes never has the Black Woman expressly as an Underworld figure in act 2 of the play, she returns in the last moments of act 3.

Camus' movie certainly resembles many others, and even Cocteau's, in preserving the baseline of the Orpheus tale: the prolific musician, in love with Eurydice, whose death prompts Orpheus descent into the Underworld, permanent loss of her, and his return to our world (and ultimately, his death). Camus develops a character, Mira, who is a rival to Eurydice for Orpheus' love. Mira is born in Moraes' play, and Camus reprises her role. Mira simplifies the plurality of persons enamored with Orpheus, a feature from the myth that Cocteau tries to preserve with his society of Bacchant women. Also significant is Camus Underworld scene, where Orpheus de-

scends from the busy streets of Rio de Janeiro into a strange ritual, where black celebrants dressed in white sing and dance a very different song from the ones we have heard thus far. The practice is Umbanda, a synchretic, religious ritual that mixes ecstatic worship derived from West Africa with Christianity. Ancestor worship and spirit possession are its stock and trade, and Orpheus hears Eurydice's disembodied voice (enclosed, we know, in another body). We see that this is not Eurydice, and Orpheus will, momentarily. The rest of the story could be simply telegraphed, but the addition of Mira and, more strikingly, the Afro – religious practice makes the Brazilian Orpheus quite unique. These features, combined with the setting in Rio de Janeiro and the elegiac tones of Bossa nova, lifted Camus' film above others.

**Diegues' 1999*Orfeu*.**

We might borrow Sartre's language, so that Camus' film expresses the antithesis position of Orphée noir, that of a black symbolic expression of identity in contrast to the thesis of whiteness, or even European identity. In this case, Diegues asserts a synthesis. He wants to correct the problem of Orpheus' self – referential blackness. Diegues sets the musician in a context wherein his blackness is incorporated into a broader body politic. Diegues, for example, drops the*noir* or *negro* from the film's title; Orfeu's blackness is incidental, or at least secondary to his Brazilian-ness. In Diegues' film, Orfeu's music is a blend of afro-reggae, pop, samba, and Bossa nova. The *favela* in which he lives in not the all-Negro locale of Camus' movie but rather a place where the poor are black, white, brown, and Indian. Diegues sheds Camus' film of its idealized *favela* (Broggi 1999). Violence is rampant, and it is often difficult to distinguish between the beat of a drum and the clap of a gunshot. Characters like Michael, the precocious youngster who names himself after Michael Jackson, underscore both charm, and the hopelessness of life for many of Brazil's underclass. Michael dreams of a more creative life, where the paintings he creates might bring profit. Orfeu's senseless death only adds to this character's desperation; Michael's dirge-like scream at the end of the movie is one not easy to forget, and it is eerily featured on the movie's soundtrack.

Diegues can be credited with restoring aspects Moraes' *Orfeu da Conceição* lost in Camus' film, although no single movie could capture and amplify all of its nuances. The 1999 film reprises Dona Conceição, Clio in the play, Orfeu's mother, whose absence from Camus' film makes Orpheus a person without a past. In Diegues' film, Dona Conceição urges Orfeu not to marry, as she does in Moraes' play. Her use of *buzios* in Diegues' movie, shells that in Candomblé and Umbanda bespeak positive or ill – omens when scattered, is new, a nod toward a dignified deployment of Afro – descendant social practices, ties to ancestral legacies.

Through Orfeu's rivalry with his childhood friend, Lucinho, Diegues allude to an extent to the "battle of the Sambas," the Underworld song competition from Moraes' act 2 that epitomizes Carnaval. Orfeu and Lucinho are now rivals for the hearts of the favelandos: the former pushing for industriousness and creativity as the way out of the favela, the latter exploiting people and resources through drug trafficking. Along with the Orpheus myth, Diegues deploys the biblical story of Cain and Abel to dichotomize

the good and bad 'brothers.'

As was the case in Moraes' play, Orfeu's song is elegiac: it is somber, conveys the brevity of life and, often, of love, and it is melancholic. The play's second act, which is the Underworld scene, is actually "the inside of the club of The Lords of the Underground," a group, led by Plutão, whom Diegues takes up as Lucinho (Lucifer). Like Lucinho, Plutão challenges Orfeu as "rei," with gang members repeating, "He [Plutão] is the king!" With regard to their more upbeat, frenetic dance, Plutão asks, "Is that Samba, or is that not Samba?" The dancing women in the Underworld claim, "I am Eurydice." Has Eurydice really chosen this Samba, "the reign of joy," over Orfeu's melancholic, realistic song? Diegues captures many aspects of the "battle of the Sambas," which he clearly interprets as a conflict of worldviews: Is the*favela* a place of nihilistic indulgence, a response to the surrounding despair; or, does the workaday ethic of Orfeu, who incessantly crafts his songs into the night, prevail?

Throughout the movie, the police who raid the*favela*, depict the real-life, ambivalent presence of the panoptical State; the Lucinho is a surrogate son to the police chief. Recently in Brazil, the two-part film *Tropa de Elite* ("Elite Troop") explores the ambivalent relationship between federal and state police forces and drug traffickers.

For all that Diegues' film wants to accomplishes, it cannot fully abandon Orpheus' postcolonial roots: Orfeu is black, his hip-hop inflected music is born from his heritage, and he is strangely out-of-place in his integrated setting. Even in 1999, Diegues' treatment resonates with Sartre's Orphée noir. The cast of characters in*Orfeu* needs the creative genius of their musician if any hope is to be granted for their desperate plight of poverty. Yet by descending inwardly, into the African of his imagination, Diegues' negro Orpheus faces dismemberment. If a true Hegelian synthesis were possible, Orpheus would live on, and the story would, finally, be rewritten. As nations make race, so race complicates reception. Black Orpheus is not a simple reception of classical myth. Rather, it is a complex, subtle, and longstanding reception that spans the 20th century.

## Notes

1. For the United States as a postcolonial setting, see Gilroy 2006.
2. In a forthcoming review of *African American Writers and Classical Tradition*, Rankine argues that the canny is precisely that which juxtaposition of black thought with Classics yields—in fact, that any juxtaposition of seemingly disparate ideas and texts is creative and revolutionary.
3. I have already cited the vast number of black people in Brazil, and I will explain this issue more below. In addition to this, military dictatorships of the 20th century in Brazil pushed for a common identity, so that cultural identity—blackness, as it were—went underground, in a manner of speaking. Marx 1998 and Oliveira 2008, among others, such as Butler 2000, discuss this as it pertains to race. See also Covin 2006.
4. At a conference in Salvador, Brazil in 2010, I learned that Veloso's wife was the producer of Diegues' film, which is worth noting, if matters of the heart influence aesthetic taste in any wise.
5. Although blacks were legally enfranchised in 1891, the legal apparatus outlawed their practices

in public spaces, so that they were disadvantaged under the law. See Merrell 2005. Universal suffrage, extending to such groups as women and the homeless, was granted in 1932.

6. See for example, Freyre 1987.

7. Oliver Taplin's note on restaging Greek drama, that significant stage action is recoverable in the text, applies here; Moraes' *requires* a black Orpheus.

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