

THE RETURN OF THE (PRODIGAL) SON IN RITA DOVE'S AND LUIS ALFARO'S ADAPTATIONS OF OEDIPUS THE KING¹

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Abstract

The current essay analyzes two adaptations of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*: Rita Dove's *The Darker Face of the Earth* and Luis Alfaro's *Oedipus El Rey*, focusing on the hero's banishment from his original home and on his return, which enables him to obtain the inheritance and power that would have been his birthrights. Attention is also paid to Oedipus as the emblematic truth-seeker who wants to access knowledge at all costs. In navigating the wealth of sources on the adaptation of Greek tragedy for the American stage, the objective is to identify insights relevant for Dove and Alfaro, whose African American and Chicana backgrounds influence their rewritings of the famous play. It is the conclusion of the study that the two artists successfully address urgent political issues for contemporary American society: the need to remember the injustices at the heart of its historical race-based slavery system and the need to empower underprivileged youths so that their lives wouldn't be destroyed by incarceration in the US prison system.

Keywords: *exile, inheritance, truth-seeking, Oedipus, Sophocles, adaptation, Greek tragedy, African American drama, Chicana drama*

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The following essay concentrates on analyzing the consequences of the hero's exile and of his re-appropriating inheritance and power in two adaptations of Sophocles' tragedy: Rita Dove's *The Darker Face of the Earth* (1994) and Luis Alfaro's *Oedipus El Rey* (2010), arguing that the Oedipus character's return to the court from where he was banished in infancy is comparable to the biblical parable of the prodigal son. Despite obvious differences between the Greek tragedy and these two contemporary adaptations, the son's experience of exile as well as his return, which leads to accessing his inheritance and to obtaining a certain degree of power, are common traits worth investigating.

As far as Sophocles's place in the history of the Greek tragedy is concerned, he is often discussed after Aeschylus and before Euripides, being remembered for the large number of plays he produced and his innovations, among which one could mention the expansion of the chorus. Even if Sophocles is believed to have produced over one hundred plays, only seven of his tragedies have been preserved (Dugdale 164). His use of irony receives special attention, its effect in *Oedipus the King* being essential for the play: "The hero known for his intellectual acumen (he was the only one able to solve the riddle of the Sphinx) and determined to solve the murder of King Laius is unable to see that the evidence which he is relentlessly tracking points plainly to him as the wrong-doer and will ultimately prove his undoing" (Dugdale 168). Over the centuries Oedipus has been identified with the human incapacity to influence destiny and with the exploration of the themes of knowledge and truth-seeking. This last theme and the inherent contradiction associated with it is presented most astutely by Tiresias himself (lines 412-4): "But I say to you, who have taunted me in my blindness, / that though you have sight, you cannot see your own evil / nor the truth of where you live and whom you live with" (Sophocles 18). Moreover, given the hero's investigative ambitions, the plot has been considered the root of the detective story (Andújar 110).

American playwrights' interest in adapting the works of Sophocles and the other Greek tragedians has had a long history. Landmark plays in American theater such as Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931) have demonstrated the relevance of modern tragedy for their contemporaries². Over several decades representatives of multi-ethnic American writing have also invited theatre audiences to challenge the perception that only mainstream artists can relate to canonical predecessors in order to extract renewed meanings from the classical texts. More and more playwrights grounded in the margin and intent

² Helen P. Foley, among many others, gives a thorough presentation of the avatars of the Greek tragedies in the United States, paying particular attention to *Electra*. In the section entitled *American Electra*, she tackles O'Neill's version, revisiting early reviews of the play and the playwright's diary (12-17).

on advancing political ideas and engendering redressive action have taken upon themselves the mission of reimagining tragic heroes and of finding expression in order to have an impact upon their audiences. In her *Diversifying Greek Tragedy on the Contemporary US Stage*, Melinda Powers selects a number of such artists and their projects to investigate, explaining: “Their productions have worked to rupture the archive in ways that negate the elitist associations with the genre to address instead cultural, sexual, and racial formations in diverse communities” (2). Bridging her expertise in ancient Greek literature with her focus on performance theory and contemporary theater, Powers is in the privileged position to evaluate to what extent US based theater practitioners who use “the hallmark of Athenian democracy to develop a new syncretic, mythological mix that reflects the needs, concerns, and anxieties of a democracy in the present” (2) do so successfully. While appreciating the comprehensive book-length study that gives in-depth analyses of several projects on the American stage, the current article, with a much more limited scope, can only aim at interesting its readers through its comparative reading of two apparently disjunctive works.

Even if they do not have similar backgrounds, ethnic affiliations and artistic trajectories, Rita Dove and Luis Alfaro have both opted for adapting Sophocles’s *Oedipus the King*, using its basic elements to reveal passions and crises confronted by the African American and Chicax characters presented. Both playwrights must have been sensitive to Oedipus’s popularity in the United States and have realized the centrality of this particular hero before starting their projects. Helen P. Foley records Oedipus’s fate throughout several decades of American theater, organizing the most notable stagings of this tragedy into five different thematic parts (“Oedipus as Scapegoat”, “Plagues”, “Theban Cycles”, “Deconstructing Fatality” and “Abandonment”) and offering a synthetic pronouncement about the hero’s significance:

The intransigent hero unjustly trapped by an incomprehensible, divinely constructed fate gradually assumed more dimensions as the democratic yet potentially tyrannical and hubristic leader, the unwitting cause of new kinds of pollution, the child deliberately abandoned by his parents, the partner of a wife/mother who developed increasing dramatic interest in her own right. (161)

With a keen sense for what is best translatable for their audiences, Dove and Alfaro have underlined to varying degrees all of the essential dimensions the hero is associated with in the scholarly presentation quoted above. If Dove exploits his being the potential cause of communal downfall, Alfaro foregrounds his tyrannical propensities, thus better serving the Chicax context.

Weaving rich intertextual works, Dove and Alfaro continue the tradition of re-envisioning tragedy for one’s contemporaries and capitalize on asking

questions that are universally human and socially relevant at the same time. In his discussion of myth and the tragic plot, Peter Burian affirms that intertextuality lies in the very texture of any tragedy: “If, from the point of view of its plots, Greek tragedy constitutes a grandiose set of variations on a relatively few legendary and formal themes, forever repeating but never the same, it follows that tragedy is not casually or occasionally intertextual, but always and inherently so” (179). In conclusion, the twentieth and twenty-first century American tragedies are only adding further intertextual layers to the ones that existed as early as Sophocles’s time. With their respective renditions of Oedipus, Dove and Alfaro embark on exploring ethnically-marked identities and cultural traditions.

The 1993-1995 U.S. Poet Laureate, Dove is fundamentally a writer of poetry and her mastery of the genre has won her recognition and awards. But with *The Darker Face of the Earth*, Dove chooses drama as a form of expression and this option allows her to contribute to the rich history of African American women’s drama. From Lorraine Hansberry³, whose *A Raisin in the Sun* was produced on Broadway in 1959, to Ntozake Shange, whose *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf* reached Broadway almost two decades later, strong feminine voices have engaged with the representation of the African American experience on stage and have attracted critical attention long before Dove’s play received its staging in 1996. In her survey of African American theater in the 1990s, Sharon Friedman discusses not only Adrienne Kennedy’s influence over several decades and continuing contribution to experimental theater (72-73), but also two other major theatrical innovators: Anna Deavere Smith and Suzan-Lori Parks. When referring to Smith’s *Fires in the Mirror* (1992) and Parks’s *The America Play* (1994), Friedman emphasizes their direct engagement with issues of race and their appetite for (re)writing history (73-75).

Being born in 1952 and maturing as a writer in the 1980s, at a moment in which the debates involving African American voices were more diversified, but no less important than during the Black Arts Movement, Dove carves her own path, embracing cosmopolitanism and the artistic forms that express it best. In her 2002 study of Dove’s work, Malin Pereira argues that not following the black nationalist agenda of the previous generation of black writers must have been perceived by Dove herself as problematic, given the possibility of intra-racial disapproval: “For Rita Dove, a cosmopolitan African American writing at the forefront of the New Black Aesthetic, cultural amalgamation thus becomes an originary moment that must be repressed” (199). The critic offers a detailed analysis of miscegenation in Dove’s entire work, showing that her play engages

³ The influences that Kevin Wetmore traces in Rita Dove’s playwriting are Adrienne Kennedy, Lorraine Hansberry, Ed Bullins, LeRoi Jones, and Derek Walcott (118).

with this theme as does the rest of her body of writing. There is no doubt, however, that theater emanates a unique fascination for Dove, since in an interview she reflects:

The play came out of love of the theatrical space, where some human beings are illuminated on the stage, and others are in darkness, watching. You have an interplay of breaths; you have tension between moving bodies and those stilled bodies attending. I have always found the theater to be a magical space, and I have always longed to enter it in some way. (McDowell 154)

Rather than give a comprehensive view of Dove's entire work, which has already been done, it is the purpose of the current endeavor to examine Dove's tackling the advantages offered by the stage and her treatment of *Oedipus the King* in comparison to that by one of her contemporaries⁴.

In his turn, MacArthur Genius Grant winner, Alfaro (born in 1963) belongs to another rich tradition, that of Chicano theater, whose beginnings are associated with *El Teatro Campesino* in the 1960s. Presentations of its founder, Luis Valdez, insist on his leading role in "a national movement of theater troupes dedicated to the exposure of socio-political problems within the Chicano communities of the United States" (Huerta 7). Originally working with farmworkers and performing "actos" and "mitos", Valdez later rose to (inter)national prominence, one of his most famous plays being *Zoot Suit* (1978), and turned to filmmaking. The political engagement at the heart of *El Teatro Campesino* is taken up by Cherríe Moraga whose work becomes markedly feminist in the 1990s. Her version of Medea is known "to transpose and transform the Aztec Creation myth of the Hungry Woman" (Friedman 80) in 1995, thus, in a way, preparing audiences in the United States for Luis Alfaro's ample project. Recently published as *The Greek Trilogy of Luis Alfaro*, this project was started at the turn of the twenty-first century and includes adaptations that center on contemporary heroes based on Electra, Oedipus and Medea⁵. Activist, performance artist and playwright, Alfaro does not hesitate to adopt and adapt three landmarks of the European canon for the purposes of educating both mainstream American and Chicana audiences.

One critical statement on Alfaro's *Electricidad* bears relevance here as well: "Alfaro's engagement with Greek myth is integral to his attempt to denunciate essentialist notions of ethnocultural authenticity and to promote

⁴ Even if listed as another African American playwright who follows the same hero in contemporaneity, Will Power's *The Seven* (2005) follows Oedipus's sons rather than the hero himself.

⁵ Another notable adaptation of *Medea* by a Latina playwright is Caridad Svich's *Wreckage* (2009).

transcultural influences and a new, critical *mestizaje* ethos” (Delikonstantinidou 36). Indeed, it is valuable to approach the playwright as part of the large body of work expressing the *mestizo/a* consciousness. In analyzing the cover of a 1998 Los Angeles Times issue, a photo in which Alfaro poses wearing a shirt that reproduces the American flag on one side and the Mexican one on the other, Alicia Arrizón lists the artist’s performance among many others that, according to her, “demarcate simultaneously the subject position of transgressive bodies, an unstable location, degrees of commodification, and contestation” (34), all this defining Aztlán as hybrid cultural territory.

Briefly put, Dove rewrites *Oedipus the King* in verse, focusing on the slave experience in the American South of the nineteenth century. She chooses to comment on the realities of this historical period, especially the anti-miscegenation mindset of American society and the dire consequences awaiting those that transgressed racial separation. Alfaro, on the other hand, uses the same myth transposed in prose in order to examine issues at the heart of the Spanish speaking community in Los Angeles, California in the twenty-first century: youth sliding into criminality in the context of the societal pressures and discrimination that characterize *barrio* life. His characters are ordinary Chicanos and Chicanas who joke, curse and watch TV.

Dove’s play was first published in 1994 by Story Line Press, and revised in 1996. The play had its first stage production at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland, Oregon, the same year, with the support of a major grant from the W. Alton Jones Foundation. The current analysis uses a third edition issued in 2000, and it does not aim to offer a comparison between the previous versions of Dove’s play since this has already been done in detail in various other studies⁶. *The Darker Face of the Earth* is set around 1820 on a plantation in South Carolina, the prologue presenting a young white woman, Amalia Jennings Lafarge, giving birth to a child. She is the heiress of a plantation and Louis’s wife. It is soon revealed that the child’s father is an African slave, Hector. The doctor who assists Amalia at this time convinces her to give away her little boy in order to save him from her husband’s rage. The first act captures events that happen twenty years later, when Amalia buys a young slave, Augustus, known for his acts of rebellion. She runs the plantation on her own now, as her husband has withdrawn from his domestic responsibilities. When the newcomer is introduced, he turns out to be educated and well-travelled, since he has been exposed to near-freedom earlier in life. He gets acquainted both with the other slaves on the plantation, and soon enough,

⁶ One such study programmatically investigating the differences between the first edition and the revised ones is Danny Sexton’s “Lifting the Veil: Revision and Double-Consciousness in Rita Dove’s *The Darker Face of the Earth*”, published in the 2008 summer issue of *Callaloo*.

with a group of conspirators, who are preparing an uprising. By the end of the first act, it is suggested that Amalia and Augustus become lovers. In the second act Augustus kills Hector, his biological father, without meaning to, and Louis, whom he mistakenly believes to be his father, at the conspirators' request. The group who initiate the uprising demand the death of both white masters: husband and wife. The truth about Augustus's birth is revealed when he confronts Amalia. At the end of the play, she kills herself and saves her son from the accusation of being a traitor to the conspirators' cause, and so he lives.

Alfaro's *Oedipus El Rey* was first produced as part of the National New Play Network's Continued Life program in three different locations: Magic Theatre in San Francisco, California, the Theatre at Boston Court, Pasadena, California, and Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, Washington, DC, in 2010-2011. The play is included in a printed edition entitled *The Greek Trilogy of Luis Alfaro*, edited by Rosa Andújar and published in 2021. Most events are set in the Pico Union district of Los Angeles, part of the action taking place in a California state prison. When Oedipus is born, Laius asks Tiresias, a close associate, to kill the baby since he has been informed of a prophecy that his son was going to murder him when he grows up. Always the mediator, Tiresias suggests that Laius should initiate an apology, showing penitence to God, but Laius refuses. When Oedipus makes his entrance as a young man, he shares his belief that he was left by his mother to "a life of picking pockets, selling pot, and juvenile detention" (Alfaro 132), thus explaining his current incarceration. A couple of owls tell him that he will kill his father, and he believes that they refer to Tiresias, the man who raised him and for whom he feels gratitude. Oedipus is released from prison and goes out into the world to make a name for himself, but on the way he meets Laius, whom he kills over who has right of way. Upon meeting Creon, an old friend from prison, he grabs the chance of acquiring a place to stay by inviting himself to Creon's house. There Oedipus meets Creon's sister, Jocasta, and falls in love with her. Enlisting her help, he decides to consolidate his position in the neighborhood and become the gang leader. After the truth is revealed, Oedipus asks his mother to blind him and she kills herself in order to escape her pain.

In her chapter "'Executing Stereotypes' in Luis Alfaro's *Electricidad*, *Oedipus El Rey*, and *Mojada*", Powers uses *to execute* both in the sense of Alfaro's employing or putting into performance recognizably Chicanx figures (the gangster, for example, in the case of the middle play), associated with an entire set of preconceived ideas, and in the sense of killing or putting to death the said notions, by subverting them from within. In order to enlist his audiences' complicity in this process of deconstruction, the playwright resorts to a wealth of popular culture references, making the play accessible and entertaining to audiences of varied backgrounds. Tiresias "StevieWonders" his way through

reading since he lost his eyesight (Alfaro 135), while the not-yet-born baby watches *Days of Our Lives* (Alfaro 129), the TV series. Later on, when Jocasta addresses Oedipus as a young man for the first time, his reply makes an intertextual connection between the play and Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976): "You talking to me?" (Alfaro 149). Moreover, important scenes are punctuated by popular hits from the 1950s and the 1970s such as "In the Still of the Night" (The Five Satins), which introduces Scene 3 and Jocasta's giving birth, and "Always and Forever" (Heatwave), which opens the dancing initiated by Jocasta and her bridegroom in Scene 16. Another way of showing that the characters are relatable is that of giving some of them atheistic attitudes. Initially, the line "I thought you didn't care about God" represents Tiresias's attempt to dissuade Laius from harming his own son. However, the king of the *barrio* retorts that his atheism is the very reason why God oppresses him: "That's why he pulls shit like this on me" (Alfaro 130). Further, Tiresias advises his friend to reach some form of reconciliation, but the latter continues to accuse God: "*Yo no!* God's a grudgeholder. Everyone thinks he's up there making miracles. *Pero ese cabron* is sitting on his recliner with his remote making my life miserable" (Alfaro 130). Thus the ultimate picture of God's indifference is painted in very colorful terms that anyone can understand.

In both plays the initial wounding that the infant condemned to death suffers is preserved. This traumatic experience is a direct legacy that the child has to overcome in order to develop as an individual. At the same time, it is evidence and visual representation of the curse, even though not immediately apparent. Thirdly, it is a way for the others to identify and recognize him when the revelation of the truth occurs. Augustus is hurt by the riding spurs that his mother's husband places in the basket in which the doctor carries him away. Even if he survives, the marks on his skin stay with him forever: "And you know the kind of scars / spurs leave, Missy. Like crowns ... / or exploding suns" (Dove 143). Closer to the Greek version, Alfaro's Oedipus has the bottoms of his feet cut off, his biological father justifying the deed as follows "I don't want him chasing me in the afterlife" (Alfaro 131). Through training and self-confidence, he manages to minimize this physical impairment and in his youth it is hardly noticeable.

Banishment and exile for both Dove's and Alfaro's Oedipus characters imply exposure to the wider world and its evils, initiation into other codes of behavior than the ones they would have otherwise grown up with, and estrangement from their respective homelands, their biological parents and their communities. Augustus is taken out to sea and thus he gets acquainted with other spaces, their stories and the prospect of freedom. Even if he is taught to read, which, as Wetmore notes, "was illegal according to American law at the time" (121), he does not live the life the son of a white heiress would have lived, had his mother been allowed to raise him as her own, nor does he live the life of his

father's peers, the plantation slaves, who only knew the grounds they had to work on. In his analysis of the play, Danny Sexton interprets the play in view of W.E.B. DuBois's idea of double-consciousness, given by, on the one hand, one's true self, and, on the other hand, the "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" (quoted in Sexton 778) and concludes that Augustus "completely represents the idea of double-consciousness" since "he is an educated black male who for a brief period is given his freedom to only be enslaved once again" (Sexton 781). Moreover, Sexton emphasizes the hero's status as different and somehow alienated from his fellowmen since "for the other slaves on the plantation, Augustus Newcastle is an anathema with his knowledge and the reputation that has preceded him" (Sexton 781). His reputation refers to his record as a rebel who has fled from his owners' plantations many times, Amalia's overseer, Jones, calling him "the most talked-about nigger along the Southern seaboard" (Dove 43). Therefore, his position is already marked as distinct, propelling him towards that of leadership in the attempt to take over the plantation for his fellow-slaves. Even if he does not realize it, this endeavor would be a re-appropriation of the fortune and power he should have inherited since "children inherit the legal and racial status of the mother" (Wetmore 121).

Similarly, Alfaro's Oedipus in California has to adapt to a life in prison, his early petty crimes leading him very far away from the life he would have had as the son of the *rey del barrio*; as he explains, Tiresias, the father who adopted him, strives to turn his mind towards religion, as they go to the library and read daily (Alfaro 135), but the attempt is unsuccessful, as Oedipus asserts, "Everybody wants God. Not me!" (Alfaro 136). Once he reaches his real parents' neighborhood, he proclaims himself the God of the *barrio* and asks the others to pray to him. This foolish gesture is emblematic for the hero's urge to take over from where his real father had left off and thus, accede to the "royal" position, which is rightfully his from birth, and if possible, reach even further in an attempt to consolidate his leadership among men.

Oedipus's return bears comparison to that of the Prodigal Son, since just as in the biblical parable, the young man is treated generously upon his reaching home. Even if in the Greek tragedy and its adaptations patricide occurs (unknowingly) first, the son is reinstated as heir and he feels empowered and even forgiven for any previous trespasses of moral standards. The differences between the two situations should also be acknowledged. The Prodigal Son is recognized from the beginning, while Oedipus's identity as royal son is revealed much later. The former is given a hero's welcome right away, while the latter accedes to what is befitting of a hero through his own efforts, by proving his qualities, particularly the intelligence that helps him solve the Sphinx's riddle, and his leadership skills

to the others. Given the fact that Oedipus is not aware that he reaches his homeland, the notion of parental forgiveness does not seem to apply literally in his case. However, some form of forgiveness does appear in the two contemporary plays: when Dove's Augustus is brought to the plantation, his reputation of troublemaker has been "forgiven" by his new masters; when Alfaro's Oedipus is allowed to stay at Creon's place, his prison past and his competitiveness, likely to cause rivalry and disorder, are also "forgiven" for a while. In keeping with the significance of Greek tragedy, the return of the banished son in the two contemporary adaptations does not trigger purely personal, but rather communal effects. Struggling to (re)capture his inheritance and to access power, he unleashes forces that he thinks he can control, but that end up proving to be destructive. The young king's boldness destabilizes the way things are done and endangers the continuance of the community he reigns over, as classical scholars explain: "conflict in tragedy is never limited to the opposition of individuals; the future of the royal house, the welfare of the community, even the ordering of human life itself may be at stake" (Burian 182).

Augustus's being called to the big house every night and overall sense of distraction on the plantation runs in parallel to the change in weather and the crops' safety being in question. Ignoring the need for picking the crops faster might cause long-term damage for the entire community. His affair with the mistress of the plantation is seen as a counter-revolutionary impulse that contradicts the interests and plans of the conspirators, who had relied on him for rallying everyone else on the plantation for their common cause and the new order they have been preparing for. However, the female landowner's affair with the newly acquired slave in the play allows for a different interpretation as well: Amalia's seducing Augustus serves as a revenge on her husband's infidelity and as a way to subdue the young man (Wetmore 124). It all points to her strength and self-affirmation.

Alfaro's Oedipus does not seem to understand or appreciate the context he has stumbled upon. Jocasta finds herself in the position of the adult who has to teach the novice more about the world, trying to prevent him from unsettling the order: "We're border people. We've always been. It's who we are. We're the stuff underneath the cement" (Alfaro 153). In response to his stubbornness in overlooking the healers' advice, in going against communal traditions and in imposing new rules such as asking Los Healers – El Mistico, El Huesero and El Curandero – for a percentage of their income (Alfaro 169), she has a warning for him, which gives Alfaro the chance to underline the ideology of the borderlands community at the center of his play:

This city, it is just borders and beliefs. It's about the old ways here. In this *barrio*—we still lay hands and kill chickens and go to church and do what the

shaman says. Look at the way we look, like our ancestors. We haven't changed. This ain't downtown—it's the borderlands. This is the way we live. You might think you have the power to make the world you want to make, but there's someone upstairs pulling your strings. You think you got here on your own? We all got destiny. We all got a story that was written for us a long time ago. We're just characters in a book. We're already history and we just started living. Our story has already been told. We're fated. (Alfaro 153)

The queen displays awareness of her community's place in the larger scheme of things. She insists on acknowledging the spatial, economic, social and political constraints that govern the barrio, a hybrid space where various diachronic and synchronic impositions and forces combine to keep the individual and the collective in check. And even if she is not satisfied with the set of rules she lives by, she points, on the one hand, to the need for respecting "the old ways" and, on the other hand, to the impossibility of cutting the strings without destructive consequences.

In keeping with many other readings of Sophocles, Oliver Taplin considers Oedipus's quest for the truth the most relevant aspect of this haunting tragedy: "The play is not about how Oedipus killed his father and married his mother, but about finding this out. It charts the discovery, uncovering that his central assumptions about his life-story, which has made him the most fortunate of all men, are quite wrong: and that the truth means that he is the least fortunate" (28). As far as this dimension is concerned, Dove is much more preoccupied with portraying her Oedipus figure's quest than Alfaro. Augustus is as skeptical as Alfaro's Oedipus character of prophecies and superstitions, since he looks upon the slave fortuneteller's "voodoo with the skepticism of Western empiricism, inculcated in him by his white master/father figure Captain Newcastle" (Pereira 201), but he is more determined than his Californian counterpart to find out the truth.

As a matter of fact, in the final act of the play, after Augustus has killed both Hector his black father, "with no knowledge of his relationship to the victim" (Wetmore 126), and Louis, the white man who could very well have fathered at least one mixed-race son, he finds out from the latter that he was born in that very same big house, given the identifying details connected to the wicker sewing basket and the riding spurs he was told that he had received from his birth parents. Believing that he is Louis's son, Augustus goes to Amalia's room and asks her which of the slave women brought him into the world, and at this point she realizes the truth first and threatens Augustus with a terrible revelation:

So you want to know who your mother is?
You think, if I tell you,
the sad tale of your life

will find its storybook ending?
 Well then, this will be my last story –
 and when I have finished,
 you will wish you had never
 stroked my hair or kissed my mouth.
 You will wish you had no eyes to see
 or ears to hear. You will wish
 you had never been born. (Dove 144)

She almost discloses the fact that she is his mother since her reference to his wishing never to have touched her in a sexual way can only be linked to the taboo of incest. Moreover, the subsequent pain she invokes is presented as potentially stirring his desire not to have been born, which goes even further than an immediate death wish and which can only point to the most non-human act there is. Despite her warning, Augustus still wants to hear what she has to say, confirming the human need for knowledge and justifying his need by saying that nothing can surprise or hurt him, after the atrocities he has witnessed in his life: “Nothing your lips can tell / Can be worse than what / These eyes have seen” (Dove 144). These lines also point to the limitations of his imagination, the certainty that he has already experienced the worst of what the world can subject an individual to and the conviction that he can survive any misfortune.

In the case of Alfaro’s play, news of the revelation that exposes the truth about Oedipus having killed Laius is brought by Creon. Even if he is accused of trying to destroy the newlyweds’ happiness, he is proven right by Tiresias’s full disclosure. The latter is the one to whom Oedipus goes in order to find out that the man he killed was his real father. After hearing the truth, Oedipus revolts against Tiresias’s choice of raising him, overlooking the explanation according to which his biological father didn’t want him in the first place and accusing Tiresias of stealing him from his *papa*. The climax of the revelation scene, Scene 18, consists of Oedipus’s “desperate confession”: “Can’t you see? I wanted to make a new story. Something no one had ever seen. I wanted to tell it my way. And I wanted to control my own destiny. But I never had the chance. All of this was decided way before I got there. Isn’t that right? Am I the way the lesson looks? Am I? AM I THE WAY THE LESSON LOOKS?” (Alfaro 176). In these lines the young man voices his rage against the cruelty and inescapability of destiny, thus illustrating the human condition. But since he can’t wrestle with his destiny, he attacks the person whom he used to consider his father, the human being who breathes defenselessly in front of him. The old man shows no sign of resisting physical violence and this makes Oedipus stop and burst into tears. Upon Jocasta’s return, he asks her to blind him and she kills herself after that. The play closes with Oedipus reentering prison, as “the chains of destiny weigh heavily in a very literal

sense” (Andújar 111) and as audiences are confronted with a visual representation of “the devastating impact of incarceration in inner-city communities” (Andújar 110).

The measure of the two adaptations’ success is their rendering all the key ingredients that have made *Oedipus the King* such a celebrated piece of art, and that, in Taplin’s words, are the foundation of all mankind: “The dynamic of the play excavates some of the root issues of human life: the will to knowledge, the pattern of a ‘biograph’ that cannot be seen even as it is being lived, the gulf between appearance and actuality, the unreliability of good fortune, the need to have fixed points, yet the impossibility of any final security” (29). At the same time, the two adaptations address political concerns of utmost importance for contemporary American society: the need for addressing the legacy of the slavery system of previous centuries and the urgency of redressing the prison system of the twenty-first century in order to eliminate high rates of recidivism.

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