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Honors Papers. 846.
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The Practice and Purpose of Adaptation of Classical Texts

Cassandra J.S. Gutterman-Johns

Abstract

This paper focuses on two adaptations of classical texts: *Off the Rails*, Reinholz's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, and *AtGN*, Howard's adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone*, and examines the ways in which these plays both replicate the cycles created by the original texts and seek to break from them. Taking theater as an inherently repetitive practice, this paper pulls from many sources to develop a vocabulary for discussing theatrical adaptations, then applies it to these two case studies to demonstrate that each uses a variety of strategies to create a new narrative. Whether a theater-maker is building new meaning into the core tenets of the story or picking up the baton and running with it, adaptation creates a potential space, within which playwrights and other theater artists have the opportunity to work with or against the original text, interrogate and remake the story, pull lines of connection between histories and cultures, and add new voices to the conversation.

Introduction: The What and Why of Adaptation

The process of theater-making is inherently repetitive. Theater artists rehearse the same scenes over and over, then put on the same show night after night. Whether your ticket is for opening or closing night, Romeo and Juliet end up dead, the good witch wins, and Godot still fails to show up. This is how theater is made: scripts are written not for one weekend of performances, but for multiple iterations across decades or centuries (Babbage 91). Godot fails to show up every time. The process of adaptation is similarly repetitive. Though adaptations may diverge from their source texts in various ways—by merging several characters or creating new ones, shifting relationships or motivations between characters, inscribing new meanings onto the text, or changing the ending altogether (Raji 144, 146)—they ultimately build upon a familiar, existing story to create a not just a reiteration, but an altered narrative.

Some scholars question why theater makers continue to produce adaptations, when “‘half the work’ is done” already, and audiences know what the ending will be (Steiner, qtd. in Brunn, “Tragedy to Ritual” 14). One reason is that by taking a familiar story and building new message or meaning into it, a play may be able to achieve a particular stance without feeling didactic or educational (Foley, qtd. in Brunn, “Tragedy to Ritual” 14). Many playwrights seek to use adaptation to find a foothold in political issues for precisely this reason. Another explanation, especially in the case of adaptations of Greek classics, is that “the Greeks knew how to write *stakes*” (Howard, “Interview”). These classical texts are full of complex and exciting plots; it makes sense that we return to them again and again and again (Foley, qtd. In Brunn, “Tragedy to Ritual” 5).

My interest in adaptation stems from several places. First, it is a natural crossroads between my two main areas of study. This research project has provided me with the opportunity

to consider the construction and purposes of adaptation, a field of thought that I am familiar with in my work in Creative Writing and as a Writing Associate. In essence, it has allowed me to apply skills from my Creative Writing Major to my studies in theater. This field of thought is also one that is personally important to my practice as a storyteller. As a young theater artist at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, I was taught to ask whose stories were being told, how, and why. Though much of the two weeks I spent at that seminar is a blur now, five years and a pandemic later, those questions have stuck with me over the last four years and continue to impact the work that I do and influence the stories that I am drawn to. By comparing the adaptations in this paper with their source texts, engaging in conversations with their playwrights, and conducting research about other playwrights and their processes, I aim to examine the choices made in the process of adaptation, and understand how the playwrights are answering this set of questions for themselves.

Different theater-makers have different approaches and attitudes toward adaptation practices. Some artists begin with the texts, while others begin with an idea, or do much of their adapting in the rehearsal room (Veronese 66-70). Julia Bardsley, an English performance instructor and practicing theater artist and adaptor considers in her own work, the source texts to be "...irrelevant. The [texts] are receptacles, in which you can start to explore things you're interested in" (Bardsley and Vincenzi 111). This type of approach allows theater-makers to boil a story down to its basic tenets, then build it back up, adding new material and ideas into the old scaffolding. Strategies like this also allow specific personal or cultural experiences to be integrated into the new text; the plainest version of the story is the most universal, and these experiences can then be transcribed to a different community, culture, or character. This is how, for instance, *Antigone* can be transposed to a stage the fall after Black Lives Matter protests

swept the country. The basic premise begins with a boy, dead in the street, being denied justice. It doesn't matter if he is in Thebes or Ferguson—the tenets of the story remain relevant, and the rest of the details can be filled in.

Another reason to adapt may be that there aren't that many stories out there to begin with. On some level, it doesn't matter if your main character is adventuring home from the Trojan war or flying through space—the hero's journey is the hero's journey. The shape of Cinderella is the same, whether it is Disney's movie or a futuristic, sci-fi retelling.¹ Emma Rice, former Artistic Director of Shakespeare's Globe and Kneehigh Theater, explains, "Those templates are there because we recognize them and because somehow they speak about a universal state of being a human being, and those are the stories I love....you need them at different times in your life and you understand them at different times of your life" (Rice 223). She describes this as a sort of "picking up the baton" and continuing to tell the story. (Rice 230).

A third reason to adapt is, in the words of prominent theater director Ivo van Hove, "because I live today" (53). There may be important dramaturgical reasons to understand the context of an original text, but van Hove believes that contemporary audiences have outgrown the use for setting Shakespeare in an Elizabethan era. Adaptation is useful because it allows theater-makers to make connections between the original texts and our lives today, while allowing the audience the necessary distance from specific current events to reflect on the greater messages of the play (van Hove 54). These old texts have the potential to remain useful and relevant to contemporary theater makers and audiences, but only if we make them so.

Adaptation can also be a critical tool for marginalized communities. The adaptation or appropriation of a classical Western text, story, or mythology can serve a variety of purposes: defense of the value or quality of a piece (Lanier 89-90) or the education of those creating it

¹ I refer here to the *Odyssey*, *Star Wars*, Disney's *Cinderella*, and Marissa Meyer's *The Lunar Chronicles*.

(Woodford-Gormley 201), reclamation of narratives, language, or histories (McDonnell 126, Fischlin 133) or a response to or push back against the original text and the culture from which it comes.² Each of these moves can be achieved through disidentification—the occupation by a group of a space that has historically excluded them. For example, the racism inherent in Shakespeare’s language around beauty can be challenged by placing a non-white actor in that place (McDonnell 138), but mere occupation of a classical text is not enough. Race-blind casting, for instance, is a misguided and ineffective attempt at equal representation onstage (Worthen 118). Race-conscious casting, on the other hand, is a practice more suited to adaptation (McDonnell 126). Adaptation allows marginalized communities to overwrite their own experiences onto familiar stories. Whether a theater-maker is building new meaning into the core tenets of the story or picking up the baton and running with it, adaptation creates a potential space, within which playwrights and other theater artists have the opportunity to work with or against the original text, interrogate and remake the story, pull lines of connection between histories and cultures, and add new voices to the conversation.

In this paper, I will examine two scripts that occupy this potential space: *Off the Rails*, a *Measure for Measure* adaptation by Randy Reinholz, and *AtGN*, an *Antigone* adaptation by Zora Howard. Each playwright takes different approaches to interrogate and remake the original story, creating new works that follow the paths of the original texts, but also take deliberate action to alter or pull away from elements of each narrative. I will analyze the ways in which these texts seek to join, add to, or disrupt the conversations and cycles perpetuated by the source material, and discuss the intentions behind each adaptation. Through my analysis of these texts, I will argue that adaptation not only repeats and reproduces familiar stories and the cycles they perpetuate, but also has the potential to innovate and alter these cycles, spiraling away from the

² Raji refers to this last concept as “writing back” to the Western world.

source material while using its framework to open texts to the stories and experiences of marginalized communities.

Before I begin my analysis of these plays, however, I find it important to outline a couple of technical and scholarly frameworks for understanding adaptation. The complicated question, and an issue that many of the artists in my readings seemed to disagree on,³ is what *counts* as an adaptation? How different from the original text does a script have to be? Or, conversely, how similar? This search for clarity is present in many studies on the topic. Some scholars will argue that any iteration of a play other than the original production is an adaptation. This is particularly relevant in discussions of Shakespeare, who himself adapted or collaborated on many of the works attributed to his name, and works in translation, such as Sophocles' tragedies, wherein each translator might be influenced in their decisions by personal biases and experiences. If there is no one authentic or authoritative text, or if the original text was, itself, an adaptation, then it follows that any reiterations of those stories could be considered adaptations as well. As simple as this conclusion may be, it also dilutes the meaning of "adaptation." By calling everything an adaptation it becomes synonymous with "putting on a show" (Kidnie 5).

The challenge, then, is in establishing a threshold for adaptation. How much can be cut before *Hamlet* isn't *Hamlet* anymore, and is the movie *Ten Things I Hate About You* an adaptation, or merely "based" on *Taming of the Shrew*?⁴ Margherita Laera, award-winning scholar specializing in translation and adaptation for the stage, draws in her introduction to *Theatre and Adaptation* a distinction between "adaptation" and "appropriation," saying that "adaptation is perceived to be...linked to literary practices" or that "appropriation" signifies more distance and difference from the source text. She concludes, though, that the difference is

³ See Laera, Veronese, Kidnie, Lanier, and Chikura et al.

⁴ Margaret Jane Kidnie writes extensively about this struggle in *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation*, (ff pp. 23-27).

about the intent of the theater artists: “appropriation emphasizes the idea of ‘taking for one’s own use’” and thus describes new media that is unconcerned with adhering to the source text (Laera 5), while adaptation makes changes with the intent of retaining the core tenets of and staying in dialogue with the original story.⁵ This distinction is drawn as a functional measure, with no qualitative judgment passed on which approach is preferable. Ultimately, the level of liberties taken with any particular text is at the discretion of the artist adapting the work, whether the adaptation is based upon a particular original text or pulling more generally from common cultural mythologies or conceptions of a story (Bardsley and Vincenzi 111).⁶

A perhaps more useful, or at least less subjective, distinction comes from Ruby Cohn, renowned theater scholar, who offers a framework of gradation to evaluate the adherence of a text to its source material. She defines a script that cuts or alters words, lines, or sections as a “reduction” or “emendation.” An adaptation, by her definition, involves the addition of new material alongside substantial cutting and rearrangement. Finally, and akin to the concept of an appropriation, Cohn describes a new work in which characters are simplified or experience new events, or in which the ending is thrown out and replaced, as a “transformation” (Kidnie 3). Though simplistic, I find this breakdown exceptionally useful. “Substantial” is still a subjective measurement in terms of adherence to the text, but Cohn’s gradation allows for clear

⁵ Marco De Marinis qualifies this difference by differentiating between “open” and “closed” texts, another framework for considering how strictly an adaptation adheres to the source text versus how “open” it is to new influences, ideas, and even audience responses (Brunn, “Tragedy to Ritual” 29).

⁶ Margherita Laera’s frameworks are less relevant to this research, but add a great deal of vocabulary for discussing adaptations to this conversation. She identifies several modes of adaptation, two primary modes including intermedial adaptation, which translates a story between media (such as a play being adapted to a movie, or a novel being turned into a play, think *Fun Home* or *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*), and intramedial adaptation, which creates a new version of the original story in the same medium. She also identifies additional modes of adapting, which can apply to both intermedial and intramedial adaptations. These include inter- and intrageneric adaptation, inter- and intracultural adaptation, inter- and intratemporal adaptation, and inter- and intraideological adaptation (Laera 5-7). These various modes attempt to describe the many ways in which a story can be adapted, within or between media, genres, cultures, eras, and ideologies. Laera’s approach to this issue is encompassing, and provides a fairly extensive vocabulary for discussions of adaptations of all kinds, though it lacks a means of quantifying the degree of change, focusing instead on providing language for many types of adaptation.

categorization. *Adaptation* incorporates new language and story, while cutting and rearranging that which the source text provides. It does not alter or add major plot points, or rewrite the story entirely: that would be *transformation*. It is also not merely a cutting. By establishing this gradation, Cohn defines adaptation both by what it is, and by what it is not.

Another helpful framework comes from Douglas Lanier, expert on Shakespearean appropriation, who defines a set of alterations that may be present in any adaptation. These categories build on and add specificity to the gradation that Cohn proposes. Lanier defines six types of alteration: extrapolated narrative, in which gaps in the plot or events mentioned in the original text in passing are developed into new plot material; interpolated narrative, in which new plot points are added to the original storyline; remotivated narrative, in which the basic plot points are left alone, but characters are further developed or their motivations are changed; revisionary narrative, in which the characters and original situation remain, but the path of the plot is altered; reoriented narrative, in which the point of view character is swapped out for another; and hybrid narrative, in which the plots or characters from more than one original text meet in the same story (Lanier 83). These definitions further break down the categories that Cohn outlines, and, unlike Cohn's definitions, are not mutually exclusive. They can, however, be sorted into the gradations that Cohn outlines. An extrapolated narrative would create a new adaptation, for example, while a revisionary narrative would constitute a transformation, or, for Laera, an appropriation. Combining these frameworks allows us to assemble a vocabulary to discuss particular aspects of adaptation with clarity. Armed with this vocabulary and the previously introduced context for adaptation, we can examine the processes, purposes, and effects of adaptation on two classical texts.

Analysis: *Off the Rails*

In 2017, Randy Reinholz's *Off the Rails* had its world premiere at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Prior to that, it was first written and performed by an all-Native cast at Native Voices at the Autry, the country's only Equity company dedicated to producing plays by and about Indigenous communities. Reinholz, a prominent Native playwright and founder of Native Voices, describes his adaptation as irreverent and subversive. *Off the Rails* transplants Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* to the Stewed Prunes Saloon of Genoa, Nebraska. Reinholz places this adaptation in the 1880s, a time when the American government was operating boarding schools⁷ for Indigenous children that aimed to "kill the indian, save the man." In this transplantation of the story, Reinholz sets the stage for an adaptation that expands upon the original text, raises the stakes, and engages Shakespeare in a conversation with a horrific period in American history.

For many cultures and communities, Shakespeare's body of work occupies a complicated space in the world of theater. Shakespeare's language is both a tool of art and theater-making, and one of cultural assimilation (Fischlin 131, McDonnell 136). As such, adaptations of Shakespeare's texts frequently serve as "colonial combat zones" (McDonnell 125). In American Indian boarding schools, Shakespeare's language was used as a tool of colonization; children, taken from their families and stripped of cultural ties, were forced to learn and recite passages from Shakespeare. When they struggled with the heightened language their difficulty was used as proof of "savagery," which was used in turn to justify the ideology and practices of manifest destiny. As a result, Shakespearean adaptations, even as they may seek to challenge the original texts, nonetheless "bear the burden of their colonial origins" (Fischlin 128). In his adaptation of

⁷ Also called "residential schools." I opt here to use "boarding schools," as that is the language used in *Off the Rails* and in Reinholz's discussion of the play and this history.

Measure for Measure, Reinholz faces this challenge head-on, utilizing Shakespeare's text to confront its colonial history.

Measure for Measure tells the story of Claudio and his sister, Isabella. The play begins with the Duke leaving the city of Vienna in the charge of Angelo, while he pretends to leave town. The Duke wants to know what will happen in his absence, so he disguises himself as a Friar. Angelo, drunk on power, decides to take this opportunity to crack down on the "immoral" parts of the city—the brothels and other sexual activity. Claudio is arrested in this crack down for impregnating his fiancée before they were married, even though they were engaged and the sex was consensual. Angelo sentences him to death, to serve as an example to the other citizens.

Isabella, meanwhile, is about to enter a nunnery. When Claudio is arrested, one of his friends tracks her down, and she returns to Vienna to beg for her brother's life. Angelo refuses, then says that he will spare Claudio if Isabella sleeps with him, sacrificing her virginity. Isabella, who is both chaste and very religious, is horrified, and tells Claudio that he will have to die, she won't sleep with Angelo. Claudio is angry, but she leaves him to his fate. At this point, the Duke, disguised as a Friar, intervenes. He tells Isabella that Angelo's scorned ex-fiancée is in town, and that she can sleep with Angelo in Isabella's place. Both women agree and go through with this ruse, but Angelo decides not to pardon Claudio. Fortunately, (for Claudio) the Duke arranges for someone else to be killed in his place, then "returns" to town. Isabella tells the Duke what has happened (though of course he already knows), and it is revealed that Claudio is still alive. The play ends with everybody pardoned, Claudio marrying his fiancée, Angelo marrying his ex-fiancée, now fiancée again, and the Duke marrying Isabella.

Even before any kind of adaptation, *Measure for Measure* is a difficult play in and of itself. Identified as one of Shakespeare's "problem plays," *Measure for Measure* has long been a

subject of criticism and distaste. For many years, the consensus was that the plot, subject, and characters of the play were all irredeemable (Miles 15-22). The Isabella character, in particular, has faced scathing reviews. Some critics frame her as the epitome of morality, idolizing her and her commitment to her morals. Others criticize her for her annoying and unrealistic commitment to her morals. Contradictorily, others describe her as wishy-washy and inconsistent (Miles 25-26). The ending is often cited as unsatisfactory, with the marriage between Angelo and Mariana feeling forced, and a sense that Angelo should have paid more severely for his crimes (Miles 16, 66). Some critics and scholars take this opinion further, arguing that the ending isn't just unsatisfactory, but that it doesn't fit; much of the play follows a tragic structure, so ending in marriage forces the plot into a comic conclusion that feels futile after so much suffering (Miles 40-42, 66).

It would be easy to conclude that this laundry list of problems makes *Measure for Measure* unfit for meaningful adaptation.⁸ But *Off the Rails* not only resolves some (though not all) of the problems in the original text, it also moves beyond the parameters of the original story and circumstances to improve upon the given framework. Utilizing and transforming Shakespeare's text also gives Reinholz and the Indigenous artists who inhabit his play the space to reclaim the language of the oppressor (Fischlin 136) in what Reinholz calls a "demonstration against savagery" (Reinholz, "Interview"). Invisibility is an assimilation strategy; by reclaiming Shakespeare's language and story, Reinholz makes Indigenous communities and artists visible. The retelling and recentering of this story is an act of de-colonialism, as well as a means for (Fischlin 133) and celebration of (Reinholz, "Interview") survival.

⁸ It seems worth mentioning, though not wholly relevant, that the first revivals of *Measure for Measure* were Cristian reclamations (Miles 58).

*Off the Rails*⁹ follows much of the same plot line. In Reinholz's play, General Gatt (the Duke) leaves town, but in Reinholz's version, he actually departs, leaving the string-pulling later in the play to Madame Overdone, who runs the Stewed Prunes Saloon (and brothel). Momaday (Claudio) is arrested by Captain Angelo, who runs the boarding school, for impregnating Caitlin, who is white (though Irish) (31). They have married each other "In the Pawnee way" (9), but this is not recognized by the town of Genoa, Nebraska, and Momaday is arrested and sentenced to death for impregnating a white girl (31).

Meanwhile, Momaday's sister Isabel is about to become a teacher in the boarding school. She is just as pious as Shakespeare's Isabella, and believes that she will be able to help the Native students in the boarding school as their teacher (40). Alexie, Momaday's friend, finds her and brings her back to town to convince Angelo to spare Momaday. Angelo offers her the same deal: sleep with him to save her brother. Isabel refuses, Momaday protests, and Madame Overdone comes forward with the idea to trick Angelo. Mariana, Angelo's ex-fiance, sleeps with him in Isabel's stead, but Angelo orders Momaday to be executed anyway. Isabel reports these events to General Gatt upon his return to town, and Momaday is revealed to be alive. The play ends in hope and celebration for each protagonist, as well as an acknowledgment of the histories of the boarding schools, and an invitation to the audience to join both the celebration and the conversation.¹⁰

Though the shape of these plays is more or less the same, the story that Reinholz tells is very different. He repurposes the original storyline by overlaying the story of an American Indian boarding school, creating an adaptation that pushes beyond the bounds of the original text.

⁹ All references to *Off the Rails* refer to the following copy of the script: Reinholz, Randy. *Off The Rails*. Ashland, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, 2017.

¹⁰ There is also a wonderful subplot about the queer romance between Alexie and the Cowboy. When I saw this play, these were the first queer characters that I had ever seen onstage. Though not as relevant to the topic of this paper, this experience has stuck with me and is one of the reasons I continue to pursue opportunities to work on new, queer plays.

He does this, primarily, by repurposing the Christian moralism that already exists in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. By pitting this ideology against Momaday's Pawnee traditions, Reinholz pulls another tool of colonialism into focus and heightens the divide between the siblings. The main conflict becomes one not just about Isabel's purity vs. Momaday's life, but about how each person chooses to live their life, and what is essential for survival. Momaday feels that Isabel is a sellout, while Isabel wishes that Momaday would abandon their traditions and assimilate, as she sees this as the only path to survival.

The issue of being a sellout comes up multiple times throughout the play, both between Momaday and Isabel, and between Madame Overdone (who is Lakota and French) and McDonald (who is Choctaw and Scottish). Madame Overdone spends most of the play fighting for the rights of Native people. She pushes to be allowed to keep ownership of her saloon under Angelo's rule and orchestrates the plan with Isabel and Mariana to save Momaday. By splitting the Duke's character in this way, Reinholz returns agency over the fate of the town to a Native woman protecting her community with the tools she has, rather than leaving it to a colonizing force that, while more benevolent than Angelo, is nonetheless bigoted and self-serving. McDonald, meanwhile, works for General Gatt (who, throughout the play, refers to him as "his" Indian), and, by extension, Angelo. Late in the play, Madame Overdone confronts McDonald, who says that he can make change from inside the system (Reinholz, *Off the Rails*, 114). Madame Overdone points out that he is inside the system, but atrocities are still happening, and he is powerless to stop it. These conversations continue to be relevant for Indigenous communities today, as Indigenous people continue to navigate the intricacies of assimilation versus tradition (Reinholz, "Interview").

Isabel, for example, has taken on an assimilationist perspective as a means of survival. She uses the name that was given to her at the boarding school and is training to become a teacher within the deracinating institution. Momaday, meanwhile, is still trying to hold onto their language and traditions. In portraying this fissure in the family (and larger community), Reinholz makes several decisions about language in his play. The first is that he integrates Pawnee language into the text. The major restriction on the Native characters in the play is that they are not allowed to speak their own languages or practice their traditions. Momaday describes doing so in secret, anyway, and we see him speaking Pawnee to Caitlin, Isabel, and his Grandfather, who appears to him in visions. Despite this being her language, too, Isabel tells him “no Pawnee,” again highlighting the difference between their worldviews (Reinholz, *Off the Rails*, 81-82).

The other major choice that Reinholz makes is about Shakespeare’s language. Though much of the text of the adapted script is new material, passages of Shakespeare’s language are preserved, and Reinholz overwrites several passages in keeping with Shakespeare’s rhythms and style. However, Reinholz also chooses to uphold a very Shakespearean convention: in Shakespeare’s texts, characters with more status speak in verse, while other characters speak in prose. In *Off the Rails*, it is the white characters that speak in Shakespeare’s original text and style, while the Native characters speak primarily in prose. Some characters, like McDonald and Isabel, are able to code switch. While speaking to General Gatt and Captain Angelo, these characters speak in verse and match the white characters measure for measure, but when they speak to other Native characters, they use normal prose (Reinholz, “Interview”). This decision acknowledges the power dynamics at play in the given circumstances, while also giving Native

characters the opportunity to demonstrate their prowess and reclaim this language. However, it also serves to perpetuate the cycles present in the original text.

Reinholz also does away with the forced marriages that take place at the end of the original script. In *Off the Rails*, there is no mention of Isabel marrying General Gatt, and Mariana is given the choice to not marry Captain Angelo—when she decides that he is too vile and she is better off without him, Angelo is taken away by the Sheriff. Though nobody dies—not Momaday, whose death we are expecting, nor Angelo, whose death we are rooting for—the elimination of these marriages makes Reinholz’s ending feel like a better fit for the story.

The most significant difference between Shakespeare’s text and Reinholz’s adaptation is not one of changing the plot. The basic tenets of the story remain the same between the original and the adaptation, but the stakes are raised immensely by the altered circumstances. When Momaday is sentenced to death, the audience really believes that Angelo will kill him—we are used to seeing marginalized characters killed as much as we are accustomed to seeing marginalized people killed—we know the history and we know what to expect. But Reinholz is still writing a comedy. In discussing this juxtaposition, Reinholz says, “I needed that comedy because...Native theater is like LGBTQ theater, like any kind of group that reclaims their voice often the first thing they do in the early parts of writing the plays is they kill the heroes constantly. And there’s a self-deprecation in there, a self-loathing, that that Native hero is going to get there but it’s gotta be true so he’s gotta die and it’s gotta be gory the way he dies because we are looking around and people constantly kill us. And it’s like ehrrrrrr...isn’t there another kind of truth we can believe in? So to have it ride on a classic comedy structure—you’re terrified that they’re going to kill the boy, you just assume that they’re going to kill the boy, and then somehow these people take action and save his life—well that’s hopeful.”

With this ending, Reinholz utilizes Shakespeare as a tool for looking back while also looking forward (Fischlin 136). *Off the Rails* manages to finish by being forward-facing, even as it acknowledges and shows the painful history it is rooted in. Reinholz also uses the final scene to take a turn toward the didactic. Though the show, for the most part, favors entertainment over education, there are several pointed moments in the last scene that direct the audience to the messages and lessons in the text. Reinholz makes these choices because he believes that theater, ultimately should be entertaining. If the audience is caught up in the story, there is more room to introduce new ideas, especially to the people in the audience who might be aligned with the beliefs of Angelo and General Gatt. He aims to start a conversation for people who wouldn't have had it otherwise—with this play Reinholz reclaims Shakespeare's text for Native voices, but turns it outward—he is not writing for a Native audience (Reinholz, "Interview").

In the final moments of this play, Momaday, Isabel, and Overdone lead the other characters in a round dance, saying, "In the boarding schools we couldn't sing and dance. NOW WE DO... We have these dances because of the resilience of those boys and girls and the caring families and elders who practiced their traditions. And we celebrate these living cultures and traditions with you" (Reinholz, *Off the Rails*, 146-147). With *Off the Rails*, Reinholz creates an adaptation that tackles the challenges of the original text by transplanting the story and altering the circumstances, raising the stakes, and entering a dialogue with the original text and its colonial history. The altered circumstances and raised stakes are essential to the success of this adaptation. The changes that Reinholz makes in these regards transform *Measure for Measure* from a problem play to a deeply compelling one. By using this text as a means for reclamation, Reinholz returns agency to his Native characters, challenges Western ideas about Shakespeare, and creates an adaptation that stretches beyond the bounds of the original text to tell a new story.

Analysis: *AtGN*

Like Reinholz's *Off the Rails*, Zora Howard's *AtGN* is an adaptation that pushes beyond the bounds of its source material. Howard's adaptation makes fewer major adjustments to the plot and structure of the original text, instead opting to add several extrapolar scenes and update the language and circumstances. Howard maintains the core tenets of the original play and builds upon them to create an *Antigone* centered in the experiences of the Black church. In this world, Kreon (counterpart to Sophocles' Creon) is not a king, but a political and religious leader. The Greek chorus becomes a gossiping, judgmental congregation, and the setting is described in the script as a place that used to be holy, but has been ravaged by the war between the brothers.

Greek myths have a way of encoding universal ways of being and thinking; artists across time and cultures have "come home" to these texts (Steiner 301). Steiner identifies two reasons for this reiteration: first, that we like to think that our roots, and the roots of our art and civilizations are mythical. Second, that Greek tragedy is inexhaustibly adaptable (Steiner 303). Though our society would be unrecognizable to the ancient Greeks, the themes and ideas of their stories remain deeply relevant to our own. Greek tragedy, therefore, is an ideal site for adaptation; it is easy to take the core tenets of a story and apply them to the world around us.

Sophocles' *Antigone* follows his titular character as she navigates a city fraught with political tension and the tragic fate of her family. We learn from the chorus that, before the play began, Oedipus left the city of Thebes to his two sons, Eteocles and Polynices. They were supposed to take turns ruling, but Eteocles refused to step down when it was Polynices' turn. Polynices was exiled, but returned to storm the city's walls, starting a war that ended when the brothers killed each other, resulting in Creon's rise to power. The audience catches up with the story just after these events, and quickly learns that Creon has declared that Polynices should not

be laid to rest, as punishment for his transgressions against the city. Antigone, distressed at this treatment of her brother, buries him anyway, without help from her sister, Ismene. Polynices burial is reported to Creon by a guard, who is sent to find the person who did it. He returns, to Creon's shock, with Antigone. Creon tries a variety of tactics to convince Antigone to relent, but she refuses to apologize, saying that he has angered the gods. As Creon sentences her, Ismene runs in, claiming that she helped Antigone bury the body and should be punished too. They are taken away to be held until their execution. Meanwhile, Haemon, Creon's son and Antigone's fiance, comes to speak with his father. He begs Creon to spare Antigone, and advises him that killing her will turn the city against him, to no avail. Creon curses Haemon, who leaves, then decides to spare Ismene.

Tiresias, the blind prophet, comes to converse with Creon. He tells him that he has angered the gods, and scares Creon into releasing Antigone. When he gets to the place where she has been entombed, it is too late. Antigone has hung herself by her scarf, and Haemon has found her body. He is wailing when Creon enters, then threatens to kill his father. Instead, he kills himself. When Eurydice, Creon's wife, hears about this, she kills herself as well. Upon hearing this news and understanding what he has done, Creon regrets his cruel actions, but it is too late. He got what he wanted, but he has lost everything in the process.

Antigone has always been a site for focusing on political issues, freedoms, and human rights. Antigones in history have represented rebellion against many different regimes, including Nazis, colonists, and the British occupation of Ireland (Raji 137). Antigone tends to be invoked when "something is rotten in [a] particular state" (McDonald, qtd. Raji 139). Howard's *AtGN* builds on this history by populating the stage with Black characters, at a time when police brutality and other violence against Black people is occurring every day in the United States. She

also returns agency to the female characters in her play—a notable move given that Antigone is also a site for showcasing gender-specific violence (Brunn, “Revolutionizing Antigone” 38). In *AtGN*, there is a new scene between Antigone and Ismene, Antigone has more speeches and more of a voice, Eurydice gets to talk, and Tiresias, the blind seer who is finally able to convince Kreon that he is wrong, is written as a woman.

The play takes place in a fragmented sanctuary. A Black boy’s body is lying in the street. The lights come up on Eteocles’ funeral, a procession steeped in ritual mourning¹¹ (1). Throughout the play, these Christian rituals are shown in opposition to more traditional, African practices. This expands the central conflict between Antigone and Kreon to a conflict between value systems, rather than a conflict over one particular person. Howard takes this even farther by implying, in the text, that Polyneices was gay (11), and that this is the reason he was first exiled from the city, and then refused his funeral rites.

The relevance of the setting and circumstances of the play are driven home by Kreon’s speech in scene 3. In Sophocles’ text, Creon addresses the chorus as the new king, and announces that Polyneices body should not be buried. In *AtGN*, Howard transforms this speech into a sermon. Pulling from the stylings of Black preachers, Kreon calls on God (rather than Zeus) and reifies the edict forbidding Polyneices burial (13-14). This speech sways the minds of the congregation, who believe in God, and, therefore, in Kreon. This transformation also grounds the adaptation in a specific community and belief system, one that many Black viewers will recognize and understand.

The tension between value and belief systems is centered around the essential question of any production of Antigone: who is grievable? In theater and life, this is a question that is

¹¹ All references to *AtGN* refer to the following copy of the script: Howard, Zora. *AtGN*. Oberlin, Oberlin College Mainstage, 2021.

answered by the ruling class. When the people in charge make decisions about this that are unjust, we—like Antigone—must stand up to protest. In *AtGN*, Howard sets up the religious patriarchy as the ruling class, in order to tell the story of a young woman in a particular community who decides that their rule is unacceptable, and takes action to displace powerful men. Throughout this play, women are given the chance to speak and be heard, by Kreon, by each other, and by the audience. The agency that Howard returns to the female characters displaces Kreon's power and calls into question the validity of the religious patriarchy. Antigone, Eurydice, and Ismene's demand to be recognized as whole people with complex internal lives rather than symbols, is, in and of itself, an act of resistance.

The character of Antigone has always had the potential to fulfill this role. Her displacement of Kreon's power is present in the original text and it furthered in the adaptation by her increase in agency. Antigone is able to displace Kreon by sticking to her guns and winning over the people. After burying her brother, Antigone is caught and brought to the sanctuary to face Kreon. In this scene, he gives her the opportunity to say that she didn't know about the edict. She tells him she did. He gives her the chance to say it was a mistake, and she says it wasn't. Finally, he gives her the chance to apologize, but she refuses. Antigone believes, with the full force of her conviction, that she is in the right, and she won't apologize for burying her brother, even to placate Kreon.

When Antigone is sentenced to death, the congregation protests. Though they begin on Kreon's side, they are uneasy about this declaration, and protest his decision to kill his niece. When Kreon decides to kill her anyway, despite their protests, as well as his son's, the congregation finds themselves aligned with Antigone—they tell Kreon to free her, and, when it becomes apparent that it is too late—she is already dead—they turn their backs on him and exit

the playing space. Antigone's refusal to sacrifice her beliefs leads directly to her death, which causes the congregation to lose faith in Kreon. In this way, the choices that Antigone makes lead directly to the undermining of Kreon's power and influence.

Antigone's ability to make choices is, in some ways, radical as well. In Sophocles' time, women were expected to be silent and differential (Raji, 136-137), and Antigone refuses to be so. In the original text, despite it being called *Antigone*, Creon does a lot of talking. He dominates the space and the scenes, even when Antigone is speaking. In Howard's adaptation, Antigone has more speeches and more opportunities to assert her beliefs, as well as more time to talk with her sister. Howard adds a scene between Antigone and Ismene after they are arrested and before Antigone's execution. In this scene, which takes place in a jail or holding cell, Antigone and Ismene have the chance to discuss their relationship, and explain their feelings about the burial to each other (43-49). In this scene, we see the tension between value and belief systems that is held between the sisters, and we get to hear, for the first time, Ismene's side of the story—why she didn't help Antigone bury Polynices. Howard felt that this scene was an essential addition to the adaptation, because it allows the audience to see the sisters together in a scene that isn't for exposition.¹² This scene—in which they are able to speak openly and honestly with each other, in which the stakes are at an all time high—allows the audience to learn about their internal lives, their relationships with each other and their mother, and to understand them more fully as young girls, who have been left to bear the brunt of unimaginable tragedy and the burden of fate (Howard, "Interview").

This new scene, as well as the speeches that Antigone delivers to Kreon in their initial confrontation, give Howard's Antigone the chance to articulate her worldview. Though her fate is the same: Antigone is sent to die, entombed alive, and ultimately hangs herself, it doesn't

¹² The way the first scene between them is.

come with the feeling of futility that tragedy can leave an audience with. Antigone's death is fated, but that doesn't mean the stakes are low, or that everything leading up to her death is futile (Howard, "Interview"). By allowing her the agency to articulate herself, stand up for what she believes in, and find closure with her sister, Howard turns Antigone's death into a choice, one that she not only accepts, but demands; she is not a symbol to be influenced or controlled, but an actor enabled to choose her fate. Because the audience understands her character as a full, autonomous person with complex feelings and desires, the "purpose" of Antigone's death is expanded beyond the symbolic, and her life is infused with meaning.

Howard makes similarly radical, if not more so, decisions regarding the character of Eurydice. A major change from the original text to Howard's adaptation is the addition of a speech from Eurydice at the end of the play. This decision is significant because the original Eurydice is silent for the duration of Sophocles' play. In *AtGN*, Eurydice silently follows Kreon around for much of the play, but in the final scene she comes forward to speak. In this monologue, Eurydice talks not about Kreon, or being a wife, but about her son and her experience of motherhood. The audience learns that Eurydice lives for her son, even knowing that he will, someday, die. Her role as a woman and mother only allowed her to protect him as long as she carried him in her womb, and she has been mourning him since the day he was born. The only relief she has is in knowing that she doesn't have to outlive him any more than she already has—she has turned a knife in her stomach, the final death of the play. The guard, who narrates to Kreon throughout this monologue, tells us that Eurydice blamed Kreon for her death, saying "that it was [he] who drove the blade" (Howard, *AtGN* 60-62).

Through this speech, Howard allows the audience a window into the mind of a character who is otherwise silent. Eurydice's reflections on motherhood also allow us a closer look at the

role of women in this world, one that we cannot see through an analysis of Antigone or Ismene. In this manner, Howard transforms Eurydice from an accessory for Kreon to a whole, rounded person capable of making choices independent of his rule, even if she cannot influence it or save her son.

The final piece of this puzzle is Ismene. In Sophocles' text, Antigone and Eurydice die, and Ismene simply disappears after she is taken away. But Howard is determined to make these women visible. In the case of Ismene, Howard makes the most radical decision of all: Ismene, despite everything, gets a future.

Ismene's story begins at Eteocles' funeral procession, where we see her ritualizing and participating in the ring shout with the other mourners. She steps out of this world to speak with Antigone, who enters the space as the procession is exiting. In this first scene between the sisters, it becomes clear that Ismene and Antigone disagree on the matter of burying their brother. Antigone believes that it is unjust for his body to lay unburied, while Ismene argues that it is safest to follow Kreon's edict (Howard, *AtGN* 3-5). When Antigone reveals that she has already buried Polynices, Ismene has to decide what to do.

As in Sophocles' text, Ismene rushes in with dirt on her hands as Kreon is sentencing Antigone. She claims that she helped to lift his body, and, despite Antigone's protests that it was her doing alone, Kreon sentences them both to death, and sends them to be locked away (Howard, *AtGN* 33-34). For Sophocles, this would be the last time the audience sees Ismene, but Howard brings her back twice more. After Haemon's appeal to his father, Howard has added an extrapolar scene between Antigone and Ismene. In this scene, Antigone and Ismene have a chance to speak to each other and explain each of their points of view. Ismene says that Antigone can apologize, even if she doesn't mean it, so that she can live, and Antigone explains that that is

not an option. She would know that it was a lie, and, moreover, she is not willing to live as Kreon's pawn (Howard, *AtGN* 47-48). Ismene replies, "There is nothing left for me if you are gone. And if I cannot go in your place, I will go with you" (48). This conversation between sisters allows two new understandings that are not present in the original text. First, the audience gets to see Antigone and Ismene as sisters. They are young women, bearing the burden of their family's sins and a tragic fate (Howard, "Interview", Howard, *AtGN* 7). We get to see a glimpse of their relationship outside of the circumstances of the play; this scene does an immense amount of work toward humanizing these characters. Second, and critically to Howard's Ismene, the audience gets to see Ismene transform from the beginning of the play to this point (Howard, "Interview"). She goes from choosing not to bury Polynices to making the choice to step away from the religious patriarchal rule of the city and choose her sister—this love—love between sisters and siblings—is the strongest force in the play.

Ismene returns one more time in the final scene. After the last lines are spoken, Ismene enters to light the candles, fulfilling the same ritual that Tiresias, the blind seer, began earlier in the play (Howard, *AtGN* 63-64). Tiresias, written, in Howard's version, as a woman, is the character most closely tied to traditional and spiritual practices present in the play, the practices that Antigone believes in, in opposition to the Christian Kreon. By taking up her mantle—literally, as she enters wearing the seer's cloak—we see that Ismene continues to choose her sister, even in death. Her presence at the end of the play shifts her from a character who disappears to one who endures. She represents the hope that there can be life again after tragedy, and the idea that the ruling class does not get to determine how we live, die, or tell our stories.

By transforming the roles of each of these women, Howard creates an adaptation that highlights the voices and agency of women, and examines their personal stakes beyond the

symbolism of sacrifice for principle or presentation (Howard, "Interview"). She allows them the space they need to become fully realized people onstage, rather than puppets of a mythology. Setting this play in the Black Christian tradition allows Howard to use this story to interrogate, challenge, push against, and celebrate the power and influence of these spaces and the people who occupy them. By working inside of the framework provided in Sophocles' text, and using an extrapolar approach to adaptation to stretch¹³ it further, Howard's *AtGN* recenters the story of *Antigone* on the women and their internal lives as they navigate a world that is not made for them.

¹³ This idea of stretching comes from Raji, 149-150.

Conclusion

Though each of these playwrights take different approaches to their work with adaptation, these plays ultimately bear many similarities. Reinholz approaches his adaptation using interpolary and remotivating tactics, while Howard focuses more on extrapolation, but both *Off the Rails* and *AtGN* take classical Western texts and overwrite them with stories that focus on the experiences of people of color. Reinholz does this by looking backward, while Howard focuses on the present and future. In each story, we see the juxtaposition of Western, Christian ideals with traditional ones. Most importantly, both plays end with a sense of hope for the future and the next generation, imagining a world that survives after tragedy and holds more space for traditional practices, marginalized stories, and Black and Indigenous joy.

The work of these plays does not, however, end when the curtain closes; they merely serve to start the conversation. In my interview with Zora Howard, she emphasized the importance of cycles in adaptation. “Art reflects the people that create it, that populate it, and that witness it....If these stories continue to resonate, then it means we’ve got some shit to do” (Howard, “Interview”). She argued emphatically that we *need* to be reminded of the cycles that the original texts perpetuate—they are in those texts because they reflect those artists, and we must remember why those cycles and ideologies are dangerous until they are broken (Howard, “Interview”). By working within these cycles and imagining new, better realities or potential futures, theater can be a vehicle for social change; as much as art reflects the society it comes from, theater has the potential to structure reality (Brunn, “Tragedy to Ritual” 5, 20).

Each of these plays seeks to engage their audiences in the conversations they open up. Reinholz talked specifically about writing for an audience who may not be familiar with or sympathetic to the history and characters he writes about. As much as *Off the Rails* is

entertaining, it is also educational, informing audiences about a history that was likely left out of U.S. history in high school. Taking a different, less didactic approach, Howard treats the audience as a part of the congregation, making everyone in the theater a part of the Greek chorus. Unable to do anything but watch, the audience is complicit when the congregation is complicit, and Kreon preaches to the audience as much as the other actors onstage. By drawing the audience into conversation with these stories, each playwright attempts to effect social change that will last after the audience leaves the theater. These plays are also important because of their impact on the actors. Each of these plays uses disidentification to serve as a reclamation of a classic text. By occupying the stage with Black and Indigenous artists, these adaptations fight for the visibility of marginalized communities. This type of community making is a vital piece of decolonizing these texts (Fischlin 136) and using them to tell new stories.

Through the examination of these adaptations, I have demonstrated several ways in which these texts not only repeat and reproduce familiar stories, but also innovate within the frameworks provided by the original plays.¹⁴ Though adaptation is inherently repetitive, that doesn't mean that adaptations are limited to recreating the cycles of their source material; indeed, adaptation has the capacity to serve the cultural status quo, but also, incrementally, to change it (Lanier 109). Adaptation may follow the pathway of the original story, (anything else would be a transformation), but narrative alterations allow the new texts to grow away from the original, spiraling, rather than circling around familiar themes, characters, and plots. It is this movement, of spiraling rather than circling, that allows theater-makers to create adaptations that move away from the cycles perpetuated by classical texts and toward real, tangible change.

¹⁴ It is important to note that further exploration of each of these texts is possible. In this paper I have just begun to scratch the surface of each adaptation; any of the ideas mentioned in these pages, as well as many that have been left out due to the scope of this project could be thoroughly examined in future research.

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