

“Kill the Pity in Us”: The Communal Crisis as Crisis of Individualism in David Greig’s *Oedipus the Visionary*

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Abstract

This essay argues that David Greig’s Oedipus the Visionary critiques the socially corrosive effects of neoliberal free market ideology and the society of enjoyment, which erode communal unities in South Africa by positioning every individual as a consumer. Individual isolation threatens traditions of collective action among South Africans which helped undermine and eventually destroy legal apartheid. Greig begins with but ultimately rejects the sacrificial crisis of the Oedipus plot in favor of collective action. This possible solution to contemporary South African problems strengthens communities as an alternative to neoliberalism. Unlike in the Sophokles hypotext, Greig’s South African villagers renounce the enjoyment promised by sacrificial violence and Oedipus is brought back into the community, suggesting the possibility of undermining global exploitation under neoliberalism through a common. Form reinforces this thematic purpose as adaptation and theatre become communal methods of re-thinking shared cultural material, creating an intellectual and performative common.

In the published introduction to his 2000 play *Oedipus the Visionary*, Scottish dramatist David Greig writes that he composed the adaptation as an exploration of power and economics (4). During a trip to the Republic of South Africa (RSA), Greig was affected by the ubiquitous presence of townships segregating the wealthy from the poor, and reflected that, “Perhaps, if

our township existed as blatantly as it does in South Africa we would find it intolerable. But, like so much else in Scotland, the architecture of power is rather elegantly executed and so the ugly realities are kept out of sight” (5). One of his great talents as a playwright is utilizing location to explore the pervasive cultural impact of late capitalism across national boundaries. As Marilena Zaroulia writes, “by using these small, unknown locations as the stage of the characters’ stories, he indicates how the flow of global capital and its consequences can penetrate people’s everyday lives in locations across the world” (178). Pursuing this thematic concern, when Greig wrote *Oedipus the Visionary* he transculturally adapted Sophokles’ *Oedipus the King* to a rural community in the mountains of South Africa.¹ Greig has a complicated subject position *vis-à-vis* African drama because he is Scottish but was raised in Nigeria and has spent an extensive amount of time in the RSA. While not an African dramatist per se, he can utilize a hybrid voice influenced heavily by both western and southern African traditions and Scottish/UK traditions.

This *Oedipus* adaptation reimagines the Theban plague as the AIDS crisis currently facing southern Africa, and it critiques global capitalism and continuing structures of economic apartheid for ignoring the plight of many poor Africans. For much of the adaptation, Greig remains quite true to the earlier Sophokles hypotext, despite the transhistorical shift from the Hellenic Heroic Age to the contemporary RSA. Greig’s Oedipus is a landowner (possibly white, though Greig neither specifies nor precludes this possibility) who rules a small rural community—an analogue for Thebes—effectively maintaining apartheid-style economic relations without the legal apparatus of a racist state. As in Sophokles, Oedipus pursues the truth about his and the community’s history in an attempt to lift the curse of a plague. However, Greig ends his play quite differently than Sophokles, with the community breaking out of the cycle of the sacrificial crisis rather than expelling Oedipus.

This paper focuses specifically on how Greig presents the socially corrosive effects of neoliberal free market ideology and the society of enjoyment, which erode communal unities by positioning every individual as a consumer in a competitive market place. This isolation of the individual threatens traditions of collective action among South Africans which helped undermine and eventually destroy legal apartheid. Following thinkers like Slavoj Žižek and Todd McGowan, I combine psychoanalytic discourses of desire, drive, and identity with Marxist inspired political economics to critique the cultural/ideological reshaping of the human subject under neoliberalism. Greig, I argue, uses the sacrificial crisis of the *Oedipus* plot to promote collective action as a possible solution to contemporary South African problems, thereby strengthening communities as an alternative to neoliberal atomization.

Greig’s play, originally just titled *Oedipus*, debuted as part of the Glasgow-

based Theatre Babel's Greeks trilogy, which included Liz Lochhead's *Medea* and Tom McGrath's *Electra*. The Greeks production was the brainchild of Graham McLaren, Theatre Babel's artistic director, who sought to bring the timeless Greek tragedies to a turn of the millennium Scottish audience. The project was conceived because McLaren believed "that the plays' sexual, familial and political cataclysms still speak very much to our times, and feels it is crucial that the language of new productions reflect their modern significance" (Brown). Both the playwriting and the performances sought to blend contemporary Scotland (and in Greig's case, contemporary South Africa) with classical Greece, straddling cultural and theatrical lines. This was a difficult performance balance. As one reviewer put it, "Greig has produced a strikingly clean, modern text; Babel's production succeeds in making it look old-fashioned" (McMillan). However much the production may have suffered in its attempts to update/represent Greek performance practices, Greig's play successfully blends the ancient with the modern in ways that shed new light on contemporary late capitalist globalization.

Late capitalist ideology intensifies the individualism already present in Sophokles' Oedipus, combining with the ethics of ownership to shape Greig's *Oedipus*. Benefiting from a racist legacy of land appropriation and economic inequality, Oedipus claims individual ownership of the land: "I came here, I live and farm this land. / *It's mine* as if it were the land that bore me" (28, my emphasis). Similarly, Jocasta tells him, "*This is your land* now. / Rule it. / Make it like it was before" (13, my emphasis). As in Sophokles, Greig's Oedipus is strongly individualistic and justifies his rule based on his own deeds—saving the people from tribulations in the past and his promise to do so again. He establishes his arke—his right to rule—by claiming,

God didn't build the dam, or road or drive away your
persecutors it was a man, men. A person. Me.
If there's a reason for this plague.
I will find and cure it [16].

In identifying his right to rule based on his deeds, Oedipus conveniently ignores the history of apartheid inequality which dispossessed the lands of indigenous Africans. He ignores as well the continuing economic inequalities that maintain a functional apartheid in neoliberal South Africa. As Geoffrey Schneider writes, "Although apartheid-era laws limiting black mobility and black voting rights have been removed, 'economic' apartheid is being perpetuated in part by neoliberal policies. The ideology of apartheid, which kept the races separate and unequal, is being replaced by the ideology of the market, which is helping to preserve that inequality" (24).

Neoliberalism fundamentally attempts to impose a free market ideology,

in which all interaction comes to be viewed in economic terms by atomized consumers. David Harvey puts it clearly: neoliberalism “holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market” (3). *Neoliberals* are, in fact, liberal primarily in the sense that they believe in individual freedom as the prime goal of an ethical society (picking up from classical Liberal philosophers like John Locke). Milton Friedman, one of the founding fathers of neoliberal political economics, identified this heritage directly in *Capitalism and Freedom*: “the intellectual movement that went under the name of liberalism emphasized freedom as the ultimate goal and the individual as the ultimate entity in society” (5). Despite contested meanings of the term in the writings of classical Liberal philosophers, what Friedman means by “freedom” is the freedom from coercion by government or economic partners, and the freedom to dispose of one’s goods, labor, etc., as one sees fit. He envisions a society with a minimal role for government, guided by the fair hand of a market system in which equally well informed and empowered rational individuals—“a collection of Robinson Crusoes” (13)—trade goods or services “*provided the transaction is bi-laterally voluntary and informed*” (13). In other words, Friedman’s philosophical understanding of a free market system ignores the realities of coercion and exploitation that mark the actual functioning of economic systems, particularly for workers, ethnic minorities, and women.

Another practical limitation of neoliberal theory is that it begins from the supposition that all consumers have or can gain access to capital. In areas with histories of inequality, replacing legally enforced segregation with free markets often perpetuates the divisions and inequalities between those with access to capital and those without it. Hand in hand with this belief is the neoliberal assertion that a free market system will break down racism. Milton Friedman made this assertion about the United States (21,108–18), and according to Schneider, the English neoliberal economist and apartheid opponent William H. Hutt’s “faith in the redistributive powers of the free market led him to conclude that no redistribution of any kind was necessary in South Africa: all that was necessary was the elimination of apartheid restrictions and the free market would tend to equalize incomes” (26). Friedman based his argument for a racially just capitalism on the premise that “the purchaser of bread does not know whether it was made from wheat grown by a white man or a Negro, by a Christian or a Jew” (109). The basis of the neoliberal argument that free markets create equality is the assumption that all economic players operate rationally and on entirely economic principles, but the theory fails to acknowledge the centrality of prejudice and the roles played by ideology and irrationality in decision making. Again, neoliberalism takes its principles from

an ideal vision of the economy—in which rationally based economic decisions outweigh all other concerns—rather than dealing with the vicissitudes of the real world, in which factors such as racism, sexism, sectarian prejudice, homophobia, xenophobia, etc., play a very real role in economic decision making and shaping unequal access to power and capital. Because of the role of prejudice, the reality has been—both in the USA and RSA—that eliminating legal racism without economic redistribution preserves structures of economic, political, and cultural capital that favor white people. Rather than seeing free markets create social justice and economic opportunity, we have seen them maintain exploitation and inequality.

Markets have played a complex role in South African history and culture, a role that tends generally toward social instability rather than the equality and stability that neoliberals promise. My argument here relies on linking local African markets with “The Market” of global capitalism, though I recognize that these two types of markets are nowhere near the same economic entity, and I try to distinguish them as much as possible. However, I make this conflation because, as we shall see, Greig himself collapses the distinction and stages a local market to stand in for the infrastructure of global late capitalism.

Historically, precolonial southern Africa did not have any major markets like those found throughout West Africa. Instead markets were introduced by European colonialists. B. W. Hodder writes, “In many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, then, markets post-date European control; are frequently strictly European-introduced phenomena; and in some cases are operated by largely non-indigenous peoples” (101). Working off the model of West African culture and faith in market economics, European colonialists created a network of local markets through southern Africa, thinking that they would fulfill the same social role the markets did in West Africa. Terrence Ranger identifies the imposition of “traditional” markets in southern Africa as part of colonial attempts to “preserve” indigenous cultures. Ranger claims markets are part of “the necessary and unplanned consequences of colonial economic and political change—of the breakup of internal patterns of trade and communication, the defining of territorial boundaries, the alienation of land, the establishment of Reserves” (455). The irony is that imposing a market “tradition” disrupted indigenous economies and power structures in southern Africa, thereby compromising local cultures rather than preserving them.

The contemporary dominance of a global capitalist free market has also had a detrimental effect on South Africa, eroding communal ties that might otherwise have helped create a more economically just “Rainbow Nation.” The problem is that neoliberal free market ideology—which the ANC made central to South African economics under pressure from the IMF and World

Bank (Narsiah 30)—atomizes individual consumers, focusing principally on individual rights and enjoyment rather than social justice or economic equality. Neoliberals like Milton Friedman identify individual freedom as the primary social good. Friedman writes, “As liberals, we take freedom of the individual, or perhaps the family, as our ultimate goal in judging social arrangements” (12). This focus on the individual as the most important socio-economic unit underpins neoliberalism’s suspicion of any sort of collectivist culture. David Harvey notes that this *freedom* bore a paradox: “While individuals are supposedly free to choose, they are not supposed to choose to construct strong collective institutions (such as trade unions) [...]. They most certainly should not choose to associate to create political parties with the aim of forcing the state to intervene in or eliminate the free market” (69). This suspicion of collective culture has been extremely effective in eroding social links—especially in the Global North—leaving contemporary subjects increasingly isolated through lifestyles focused on consumption and the paranoid suspicion that everyone poses a threat to our property/enjoyment. This paranoia is Hobbes’s little-acknowledged contribution to the neoliberal worldview. Robert Putnam, in his thoroughly researched book *Bowling Alone*, has traced the decline of social capital and civic engagement in the United States since the 1970s. He argues that Americans are now less engaged with our communities, friends, and governments than our predecessors of the Great Depression and World War II generation. And while Putnam attributes this decline in social capital to the rise of television as an isolating experience, Randy Martin suggests that the financialization of everyday life has created a culture of paranoid suspicion. Martin argues that daily life is increasingly conceptualized through the medium of finance—economic transactions based in assumptions of scarcity, which normalizes competition and risk. Martin identifies something schizophrenic about this mode of late capitalist existence: “A hypercompetitive world such as this requires constant attention to opportunity and vigilance as to potential threats. There is nowhere to hide, and no moment of respite from the exertions of financial activity” (36). Martin argues that this unremitting activity has become the norm for subjects of late capitalism.

Of course, Putnam’s book is focused on U.S. culture and Martin’s book implicitly explores Global North (especially U.S.) cultural trends. While Greig is a Scottish dramatist writing for a Scottish audience, his play attempts to explore economic issues facing both the UK *and* South Africa. But how much do the changes Putnam and Martin identify hold true for the RSA? This is a challenging question, but I think the simple answer is that late capitalist cultural trends affecting the United States and the Global North are increasingly influencing African cultures. James Ferguson argues that theorists of neoliberal globalization—both proponents and opponents—rarely deal thoroughly with

Africa's role in a globalized economy, often preferring to discuss the continent minimally or not at all (25). However, as Ferguson's book *Global Shadows* makes evident, just because no one is talking about African neoliberalism doesn't mean that late capitalism is not reshaping national economies and the continent's position in a global economy. Under neoliberal policies imposed by the IMF and World Bank, there have been few African success stories to mirror the Asian Tigers or the Celtic Tiger, partly because capitalists generally avoid Africa fearing national instability, or because "When capital *has* come into Africa in recent years, it has been overwhelmingly in the area of mineral-resource extraction" (Ferguson 35). While much capital investment has been socially thin—isolated enclaves of Western technicians remaining in insular resource extraction facilities rather than engaging with and spending money in local economies—on the national level neoliberal policies guide much reformation in contemporary African countries. As David Harvey points out, "The IMF and the World Bank [...] became centres for the propagation and enforcement of 'free market fundamentalism' and neoliberal orthodoxy. In return for debt rescheduling, indebted countries were required to implement institutional reforms, such as cuts in welfare expenditures, more flexible labour market laws, and privatization" (29). According to Sagie Narsiah, pressure on South Africa and the ANC from the IMF and World Bank played a large role in shifting the ANC's policies from a socialist focus on economic justice to a neoliberal faith in free markets, particularly through the GEAR program. Responding to pressure from the IMF and World Bank, "South Africa was formally subsumed into a neoliberal, free-market paradigm in 1996—with the adoption of the Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) program. Particular policy positions were adopted as a consequence, promoting fiscal austerity, export oriented development and privatisation" (Narsiah 31). The economic policies Narsiah identifies in South Africa since 1996 largely conform to neoliberal orthodoxy, using free markets and private property to preserve the social order.

In *Oedipus the Visionary* we see the individualizing psychological action of the market staged. Scene Five is set in the town market, where individual members of the chorus imagine what they'll do with the money if they can manage to sell their few personal possessions. Of course, in traditional Greek tragedy (as well as most of Greig's play) the chorus represents a communal voice, or a voice with which the audience is collectively supposed to identify. For Greig to split these chorus members up as individuals within this market sphere is significant. Greig himself points this out, writing in the "Note on the Chorus" that "At certain points they [the chorus] are individuated as 'Man 1' or 'Woman 1.' This individuation should be respected" (8). The market itself is a dismal place, a space of sad dreams, sickness, and despair. Each chorus

member—as Greig said, identified only by gender and a number—has his or her own reason for wanting money. Man 1 wants to go to Harvard business school so he can get a good job, Man 2 wants a happy meal, and Woman 2 wants to hear music and see movies (22–24). The specific goals that these chorus members discuss mask the real object of their desire, which is expressed unconsciously through the form of the desire. Their stated goals are the *objet petit a* in Lacanian psychoanalysis. As Lacan explains, the *objet petit a* is “a privileged object, which has emerged from some primal separation, from the self-mutilation induced by the very approach of the real” (83). Or as Todd McGowan puts it, “It is the object that holds out the promise of the ultimate jouissance for the subject. And yet, at the same time, it is an impossible object: it remains always just out of reach” (77). In other words, the *objet petit a* substitutes for the actual desire, which is the castrated phallus, or the experience of the subject’s wholeness which has been lost upon entry into the symbolic order. The problem of course is that no object obtainable within the symbolic order can actually replace the phallus, so the search is always in vain.

The guiding force of desire in Scene Five is what Freud called the death drive or death instinct, which is a primordial desire to return to an inorganic state. Freud says of the death drive, “*an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things* which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces” (30). Trauma can bring the death drive most obviously to the surface by disrupting the balance between the pleasure principle—the desire to seek happiness and avoid unhappiness—and the reality principle—which acknowledges the need for delayed gratification. Amidst the trauma of the AIDS crisis/Theban plague, the characters in the market seek escape, release, sleep, and even death—on a fundamental level they seek a return to the inorganic state. Take, as an example, Man 2. Man 2 wants to consume a McDonald’s Happy Meal, which is, of course, a perfect representative of *objet petit a* because the very name “Happy Meal” declares the food to have a privileged connection to enjoyment. And this connection to enjoyment is exactly what Man 2 ostensibly seeks, claiming he wants to “know that I have done what I wanted, only once” (23). However, the *objet petit a* simultaneously obscures and reveals the real object of desire, which is the death drive. Man 2 speaks three times in scene five, and the interaction with the Happy Meal moves from a refined consumer experience to excrement. In his opening line, Man 2 says specifically that he wants to *buy* a Happy Meal; he does not initially say he wants to *eat* a Happy Meal, meaning that this interaction is centered in the space of the commercial, the space of the commodity (22). The next time Man 2 speaks the interaction is more visceral. He claims he wants to “feel the warm burger meat fill my stomach,” moving from the realm of the impersonal commodity to the mechanics of digestion

(23). Finally, in his last bit of dialogue in this scene, Man 2 wants to know “what it’s like to shit burger meat onto the dry earth by the roadside” (24). This final change is revelatory. In shifting the focus of desire from the consumer purchase of the commodity/*objet petit a* to leaving excrement by the roadside we see the truth of Man 2’s desire, which is to escape the consumer cycle so reliant on an economy of enjoyment and return to an inorganic, or perhaps pre-symbolic, condition.

The culmination and most direct representative of the despairing voices in this market is Man 6, the presentation of whom is an almost heavy-handed evocation of the death drive. Man 6 intends to buy alcohol and drink himself into oblivion, then “when I’m no longer conscious of anything. / I’ll smash one of the bottles on a rock. / And cut my throat with the glass” (24). More explicitly than any of the other chorus members, Man 6 seeks death in both the figurative and literal senses. The Freudian death drive is not simply or directly about wanting to die, but about achieving “an initial state from which the living entity has at one time or other departed and to which it is striving to return by the circuitous paths along which its development leads” (Freud 32). So both in a simple sense of seeking death directly, and in the more properly Freudian sense of seeking an inorganic oblivion through extreme drunkenness, the object of Man 6’s desire correlates with the instinctual dictates of the death drive.

This scene embodies the action of the neoliberal market, and the paradoxical destructiveness of desire within the society of enjoyment. Todd McGowan identifies a contemporary shift from the society of prohibition to the society of enjoyment, that is, to a society in which the fundamental commandment of the Other is to enjoy. This shift is tied to neoliberal political economics because “Global capitalism functions by submitting all cultural life to the process of commodification, and this process can only be sustained if everyone is engaged in the endless pursuit of enjoyment” (McGowan 50). What this means is that global capitalism constructs a new mode of subjectivity for the individual, namely pathological narcissism (34). The pathological narcissist has no interest in or responsibility to a community, but is entirely geared toward seeking his or her own enjoyment in compliance with the Law of the Other. Within the psychological structure of neoliberal capitalism, each individual is pitted against one another, with nothing of value to sell in a market where no one is buying. Greig’s presentation of the market condemns neoliberal capitalism for atomizing individuals, each of whom is ostensibly responsible only for his or her own desires, with no space for civic or social unity in the face of the AIDS crisis.

This erosion of community as a valued organizing principle precipitates what René Girard calls the sacrificial crisis, which he argues underpins the

movement of tragedy. In a society in crisis, forces like anxiety, tension, dissent, and violence build to potentially explosive or revolutionary levels if not vented. Girard theorizes that a crisis becomes “sacrificial” when the community selects a surrogate victim who can become a kind of lightning rod attracting all the violence that would otherwise destroy the community itself. As he puts it, “The sacrifice serves to protect the entire community from *its own* violence. [...] The elements of dissention scattered throughout the community are drawn to the person of the sacrificial victim and eliminated, at least temporarily, by its sacrifice” (8). In *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard traces this as the fundamental narrative structure of Greek tragedies, and Greig maintains the sacrificial crisis structure into *Oedipus the Visionary* by transplanting almost exactly the plot structure from the Sophokles hypotext. We see the cultural erosion and self-destructive violence building in South Africa in scene five, culminating in the suicidal dream of Man 6. The longing for oblivion and death signifies a larger cycle of violence as the community breaks down, replacing the harmonious dream of the Rainbow Nation with individuals competing in an indifferent free market sphere. We also see this violence and social collapse in Scene One, in which the chorus prays not to feel pity for a dying man. As Friedman says, everyone becomes a kind of Robinson Crusoe, occupying his or her own isolated island and left to the mercies of the market without communal support or unity.

However, African markets also offer the potential for rebuilding unified communities. Although they are not indigenous to southern Africa, in West Africa traditional markets functioned somewhat like the bourgeois public sphere described by Jürgen Habermas. Although in practice the public sphere always fell short, Habermas identifies three ideal characteristics of the bourgeois public: (1) status is disregarded in favor of rational debates between equals, (2) discussions focus on areas of common concern, and (3) anyone can enter the public sphere by meeting certain criteria (36–37). The openness and equality that were the ideals of the European bourgeois public sphere also characterizes West African markets. These markets are community centers in which to meet people, hear and discuss the latest news, and so on. Paul Bohannan and Philip Curtain write that markets “could be used for many purposes other than buying and selling—to meet your girlfriend, settle a legal dispute, get the latest news, or pay your respects to important elders or chiefs. Market places in Africa are almost as important politically and socially as they are economically” (103). Kevin Wetmore, Jr., links African markets to the Athenian *agora*, writing, “the marketplace of Athens was in many ways the cultural, social, economic, political, and geographic center of the city. Similarly, the marketplace in any African village is the center of everyday life” (41). Although markets were traditionally controlled by a local chief or king, their daily func-

tioning was fairly democratic. In this sense, the market made up a kind of commonwealth, or a space of common ownership inhabited by the multitude.

I use the terms *commonwealth* and *multitude* in the sense theorized by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. For them the commonwealth encompasses both an environmental commons—air, water, space, etc.—but also the shared products of culture that allow for the continuation and reproduction of culture—language, affect, gesture, style, information, etc. (viii). And they theorize the multitude as a collective group of singularities, or individuals formed by and inextricable from social contexts (111). The multitude allows the coordination of various liberatory struggles in contrast to the organized and powerful forces of oppression because multitude brings together singularities and finds common ground between them. It is through the existence of the multitude itself that the common comes into being; or, as Hardt and Negri put it, “the common is composed of interactions among singularities” (124). Hardt and Negri propose the common as an alternative basis for social organization, contesting late capitalist neoliberalism’s emphasis on the individual as isolated consumer in ostensibly beneficial free markets. The openness and communality of traditional markets may offer one model for envisioning an African commons out of which collective action could arise to improve the conditions of the African poor and eliminate the systems of inequality sustained by neoliberal economic apartheid and global inequality.

Indeed *Oedipus the Visionary* envisions collective action in the culmination of the sacrificial crisis. Girard emphasizes the communal nature of selecting a sacrificial victim: “Each member’s hostility, caused by clashing against others, becomes converted from an individual feeling to a communal force unanimously directed against a single individual” (79). In *Oedipus the Visionary*, Oedipus comes to stand in for all the evils of colonialism, apartheid, continuing economic apartheid, and the Global North’s indifference to the AIDS crisis (in other words Oedipus becomes a new shared *objet petit a*, the object standing in for desire). He must therefore be expelled from the community in an attempt to make it symbolically whole again. As in Sophokles, Greig’s Oedipus largely drives his own self-sacrifice, telling the people, “Inside my skin is all the agony the world can make. / I hold it in me. / My skin protects you. / Outside my skin the world is good” (83). In his pain and shame Oedipus tries to retain his individuality—the atomized selfhood which neoliberalism envisions as the human condition. Rather than seeing himself in a context, Oedipus retains his earlier attitude of total ownership, both of his ill-gotten possessions and of his deeds.

This is where Greig really diverges from the Sophokles hypotext. In Sophokles’ *Oedipus the King* the titular character is expelled from the community, thereby fulfilling the cyclical movement of the sacrificial crisis. It is also clear in Sophokles that, while the chorus may find an object lesson in his

tragedy, they do not identify themselves with Oedipus. At the end of *Oedipus the King* the chorus reflects,

Look on this Oedipus, the mighty and once masterful:
 Elucidator of the riddle,
 Envied on his pedestal of fame.
 You saw him fall. You saw him swept away [263].

In these final lines of the play the chorus continues to discuss Oedipus as an individual, as an isolated person who can be disconnected from the Theban *polis* and exiled to his fate. And indeed, Oedipus continues to figure as lone individual in *Oedipus at Kolonus*.

By contrast, in Greig’s *Oedipus the Visionary*, even in his self-sacrifice Oedipus can never truly be expelled from the community—he remains an integral part of the larger identity of the multitude. In the face of Oedipus’ individual suffering, the community experiences a melting of identities into a commonwealth of universal experience. During the play’s climax in Scene Sixteen, the priest tells the people,

His mind and body dissolved.
 He became nothing.
 He became all time.
 Nature shatters all humanity.
We are Oedipus.
We are nothing [76, my emphasis].

Oedipus is brought back into the fold, back into a shared experience of the world through suffering, and therefore back into the commonwealth of humanity. This prayer that incorporates Oedipus back into the commonwealth of humanity stands in stark contrast to the first scene of the play, which serves as a foil for the renunciation of sacrificial violence. In Scene One the chorus watches a man dying of thirst drag himself along seeking water. Instead of helping this man, the chorus prays—establishing a parallel ritual of prayer in scene one and in Scene Sixteen—that God will “kill the pity in us” as they helplessly watch the man die (10). The prayer envisions a god of opulence and enjoyment: this is the god/ Other imagined as having total access to enjoyment in ways denied to subjects within the society of enjoyment. The chorus’ prayer addresses,

Dear fat god.
 Dear drunken god.
 God on your throne of battered gold leaf.
 In your rooms of red velvet.
 With your naked, laughing whores sat on your lap.
 Your mouth stained red with wine.
 Make us like you.
 Give us the power of your hate.
 The power of a God to see pain and feel nothing [10–11].

In this vision of hedonistic enjoyment—of food, wine, sex, texture, color, and indifference—the chorus addresses the Big Other of neoliberal capitalism, which commands enjoyment and simultaneously punishes the subject for never being able to enjoy enough. To this god, the god of enjoyment, the chorus prays for the power of hate, which could eliminate the unpleasure of seeing disease and suffering destroying the community. But this prayer from Scene One is replaced in Scene Sixteen with the prayer to bring Oedipus back into a renewed community, which renounces the enjoyment promised by violence in the cycle of the sacrificial crisis.

This mode of connection characterizes African ritual and drama, as well as Greek theatre, which serve to strengthen communities. Kevin Wetmore identifies the communal effect of sacrifice in African ritual, noting that “sacrifice is a form of reciprocation that unites the realm of the mortals with the realm of the immortals”; and further that “in a group context sacrifice forms a communal bond that joins the participants into a community” (61). While Greig is not an African dramatist, *Oedipus the Visionary* reflects a similar kind of communal experience, a communal connection that allows intersubjectivity to replace isolation. Clare Wallace traces this connectivity in many of Greig’s plays as a counterpoint to the erosive force of global capitalism: “If postmodern globalization is often seen to offer a plethora of potentially detrimental or disorienting effects, Greig turns to the ethical resources of human communication and contingent communities as a means of suggesting, however partially, utopian possibilities of transcending those negative conditions” (107).

In Athenian democracy theatre also had political implications, in the sense of opening new possibilities for thinking about the world. In contrast to the relatively limited scope of Athenian democracy in practice, on stage Athenians could imagine vastly expanded political possibilities and democratic openness. In “The Sociology of Athenian Tragedy,” Edith Hall argues, “Greek tragedy does its thinking in a form which is vastly more politically advanced than the society which produced Greek tragedy. The human imagination has always been capable of creating egalitarian modes of society even when they are inconceivable in practice” (125). Graham McLaren’s original production for Theatre Babel tried to evoke the Greek roots of *Oedipus the King*, though not entirely successfully. In her review for *The Scotsman*, Joyce McMillan wrote that, “Graham McLaren’s staging—all oatmeal-coloured robes, stilted body-language, cold-eyed cockney chorus and a single barren tree—somehow looks like nothing more than a string of clichés drawn from some textbook of classic productions.” While the *mise-en-scène* may not have been the most aesthetically pleasing choice, the decision to visually evoke the story’s Greek roots built connections between the modern audience and the ancient Athenians, including links shared by theatre-goers the world over: the collective experience of

theatre as a public art form. The experience of theatre is deeply human, which has the potential to connect audiences across time, space, and culture, producing a commonwealth of spectators. In Greig’s play, Oedipus’ pain and shame become part of a shared human experience, and it is through the collective recognition and embrace of this common that it becomes possible to break the cycle of violence constituting the sacrificial crisis.

This recognition of the common and renunciation of sacrificial violence gestures toward an end to global capitalism and the society of enjoyment. Obviously Greig is not presenting a simple or transcendental strategy for moving beyond the current political economic mode, but through recognition of our place within the organizing structures of neoliberal capitalism it is possible to affect a resistance by working against the forces of social isolation. The problem created by global capitalism is that “The society of enjoyment works to convince subjects that they exist outside this society, in independent isolation. It thus becomes increasingly difficult to grasp oneself within the universal” (McGowan 193). However, by recognizing ourselves as singularities already existing in the multitude, and therefore already imbedded in the common, we work against the forces of neoliberalism that seek to destroy communities. In the choice not to expel Oedipus from the community—contra Sophokles—Greig’s South African community renounces the enjoyment promised by violence, the enjoyment promised by the structure of the sacrificial crisis. Instead of pursuing the *objet petit a* by killing or expelling Oedipus, the community elects to accept its own partial enjoyment, thereby leaving the cycle of consumer-compelled desire. Similarly by coming together in the shared space of the theatre to enjoy and reflect collectively (like Greek and African theatre audiences), we can resist the cultural imperative to enjoy individually and rebuild ties of communal experience.

Ultimately, I propose that adaptation as a form promotes a commonwealth, so when Greig chooses to adapt the *Oedipus* story to protest the cultural and economic violence of neoliberalism, the mode of protest performs a common. In reworking Sophokles’ *Oedipus the King*, Greig chooses a well-known piece of Western cultural heritage (which has extensive colonial and postcolonial implications in Africa, as books like Kevin Wetmore’s *Athenian Sun in an African Sky* or Astrid Van Weyenberg’s *Politics of Adaptation*, among many others, trace in far more detail than I can here). Particularly among African dramatists, adaptation is often a vehicle for multi-faceted political protest, and I think Grieg works in this same tradition. Van Weyenberg’s central argument in *The Politics of Adaptation* is that postcolonial African dramatists adapt Greek plays to speak politically to (1) the place of Greek drama in a culturally constructed hierarchy of literature, (2) the Global North and (former) imperial nations which continue to assume the superiority of an ostensibly Greek-

derived Western culture; and (3) against contemporary African political and economic problems. She locates African adapters like Soyinka, Osofisan, Fugard, and Farber in the struggle against notions of cultural ownership, thereby suggesting innate ties between adaptation and the common. Van Weyenberg writes that “by offering Greek tragedies as theirs, the playwrights indirectly yet effectively undermine eurocentric claims of ownership and authority. They counter these claims by performing, through adaptation, a cultural politics directed at the Europe or West that has traditionally considered Greece as its property” (xii). But she also notes the risk involved in reading African adaptations as merely responses to the Global North, as merely responses to colonialism: “To see these texts mainly in terms of resistance makes the history of colonialism their defining force and the ‘West’ their sole term of comparison, a perspective that ultimately threatens to reduce African literatures to mere addenda to European culture” (xlix).

In adapting Sophokles’ plot to a South African setting, Greig locates himself on the periphery of these trends in postcolonial African adaptation. Obviously Greig does not speak from an originary African perspective and his primary audience is European, but I would argue that his choice to relocate *Oedipus the King* in the Rainbow Nation contests European ownership of the myth and of Greek culture in ways comparable to those Van Weyenberg identifies. It is also significant that in Greig’s adaptation it is the African community that transcends the sacrificial and political economic structures of violence that shape the neoliberal Global North. This suggests a reciprocal relationship in which both Europeans and Africans contribute to a common understanding of the *Oedipus* myth and the lessons it can teach us today. Rather than stressing primacy or cultural ownership, Greig envisions an open dialogue between cultures and peoples working toward producing a more just, equal, and welcoming global society. In other words, by addressing a Scottish/UK audience from a hybrid African position, Greig provides a template for social justice and collective action that can be applied to fight the oppressive forces of neoliberalism in both the RSA and the UK. This play combines both Brechtian critical distance—by addressing a UK audience with a South African setting—and simultaneously a cultural hybridity via Homi Bhabha—because Greig draws on both European and African performance traditions to create a new and shared dramaturgy. It is both a critique of Scotland’s place in a neoliberal world order (as a member of the UK, one of the major pillars of global capitalism) and a call to Scottish/British people to recognize and resist their own exploitation under a neoliberal world order.

Greig’s reworking of this source material becomes a collaborative process between himself and Sophokles, and then with the directors, actors, tech people, audiences, and communities in which the play is performed. Linda

Hutcheon notes that stage performances, like cinema, are extremely complex collaborative experiences with any number of people at various stages of the performance process acting as potential adapters (83). This multiplicity of adapters working together toward a performative project would probably appeal to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri as a prime example of the common. As they say, multiple people can productively use a single idea and develop it in new and different forms to add to the collective stock of knowledge and culture (Hardt and Negri 381). Hutcheon notes that adaptation is a popular form in the neoliberal era because well-loved source texts bring their own "franchise," or built-in audience predisposed to see the movie, play the game, buy the merchandise, etc. (87). But adaptation also poses a threat to the very notion of ownership, which is fundamental to neoliberalism's ideological investment in property. Hutcheon writes, "Adaptations are not only *spawned* by the capitalist desire for gain; they are also *controlled* by the same in law, for they constitute a threat to the ownership of cultural and intellectual property" (89). Therefore, by adapting we can enact a commonwealth, breaking down neoliberal notions of ownership in favor of intellectual and performative communities of writers, actors, theatre practitioners, audiences, and communities. As with recognizing our own position as subjects whose desire for enjoyment is shaped by neoliberal capitalism, enacting communities offers a means to resist the society of enjoyment and the consumer-isolation that results from it. We create the commonwealth by performing it.

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NOTE

1. I use the term *transcultural adaptation* in the same sense Linda Hutcheon uses it in *A Theory of Adaptation*, broadly meaning a shift from one cultural context to another. She notes, "Almost always, there is an accompanying shift in the political valence from the adapted text to the 'transculturated' adaptation" (145). Within this shift, I see the potential for cultural interconnection, not only between modern and ancient theatre, but within increasingly globalized performance contexts. Diana Taylor writes that transculturation has the potential to produce a commons because "Rather than being oppositional or strictly dialectical, it *circulates*" between dominant and marginalized cultures, thereby potentially decentering hegemonic power structures (71).

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