

# Opera, Sound Recording, and Critical Race Theory: Making a Sub-Field Audible

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This review essay is about a field that does not yet exist. It considers the relationships among opera, sound recording, and critical race theory,<sup>1</sup> and explores them at a moment when these fields are beginning to converge.<sup>2</sup> One of my concerns will be the recent and ground-breaking studies and collections on opera and race by Naomi Adele André (2017, 2019), Kira Thurman (2012, 2019), Pamela Karantonis and Dylan Robinson (2011), and Mary I. Ingraham, Joseph K. So and Roy Moodley (2016). Another will be the neglected history of opera and sound recording; notable scholars here include Karen Henson (2020), Robert Cannon (2014), and Richard Leppert (2015). Finally, I will focus on the thought-provoking analyses of race and sound by Alexander Weheliye (2005), Brian Ward (2003), Jennifer Lynn Stoeber (2016) and Nina Sun Eidsheim (2019). There are obvious connections among these three bodies of scholarship, yet these connections have not yet been clearly identified and explored.

Although many scholars have come to embrace opera as a material and embodied phenomenon, the artform's dissemination, analysis, and enjoyment through sound recording is still overlooked as a site of enquiry, especially its potential as a fertile site of inquiry about identity. To overlook the issue of identity in relation to recording is to perpetuate the belief that recordings are primarily documents of performance practice. It ignores the army of technicians who invisibly craft the acoustic object, many of whom are historically white and male. This review essay seeks to address this neglect and to suggest some ways in which the processes of making and consuming opera recordings is intimately related to whiteness and anti-Blackness—but also to Black possibility. In what follows, I cast a broad net, ranging widely and at times unexpectedly. I begin with some recent events in American musicology and in the New York operatic scene; then, turn to a consideration of some of the scholarship just mentioned; and finally conclude with a brief discussion of a specific recording, the Metropolitan Opera's "live" sound recording of the 2019 production of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*.

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### I: The Problem(s)

In 2020, the American Musicological Society (AMS) responded in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and included, in that year's annual meeting, an unprecedented number of papers, discussions, and events on the subject of music and race.<sup>3</sup> Several panels focused on different aspects of Blackness and music; the plenary keynote speaker was Daphne Brooks, an esteemed figure in African-American studies who writes about music, performance, sound recording, gender, and race; and the Committee on Race and Ethnicity invited Farah Jasmine Griffin, a similarly esteemed African-American studies scholar and cultural critic, to present her research on quiet and stillness in Black music.<sup>4</sup> The AMS is a large and powerful institution that seeks to represent musicology's scholarly interests and investments, and this was a radical shift in programming that made space for voices, bodies, and research that had until that point never been so centrally represented.<sup>5</sup>

On the one hand, this shift inspires hope, particularly for young scholars such as myself, who are just entering the discipline. One hopes to see musicologists not only better appreciate, respect, and consider the thoughts, experiences, and contributions of its BIPOC and other underrepresented scholars, but also use their work toward amending, dismantling, and replacing the structures that make the field forbidding and even harmful to such scholars. On the other hand, one wonders whether the AMS will continue to pursue a progressive scholarly agenda, once the turbulence of the last few years has passed.<sup>6</sup> In her ground-breaking article, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Hortense J. Spillers created a vocabulary to address the histories of Black people, especially Black women, generating a discourse that the mainstream academy would recognize. Her writing made Black history and bodily knowledge desirable to scholars and necessitated that Black women were included in the ensuing conversations. Yet, thirty years later, she (2007, 301) warned us:

You know, people are going to have to keep doing it, or rediscover it again, or reassert it because the forces of opposition are so forceful and so powerful and they're always pushing against us, they always want to enforce forgetfulness. They always want to do something that forgets the African presence or reabsorbs it, reappropriates it in another way. The need to confront psychological violence, epistemic violence, intellectual violence is really powerful.

Although I am taking a risk by committing this to print, I was reminded of Spillers's prognosis when I attended one of the AMS's 2020 sessions devoted to

Blackness and music, the “Black Opera” panel. The session was chaired by André (and the session title most likely inspired by her book, *Black Opera*). All five panelists presented as white, and André had invited some notable Black figures to respond, including the scholars Thurman and Brenda (Innocentia) J. Mhlambi and the distinguished opera composer Anthony Davis. The papers were excellent, and the discussants made thought-provoking comments. Thurman seemed to echo Spillers’s warning when she observed (and I am paraphrasing) that, “often when white institutions attempt to address racial inequity whether in academia, the opera industry, or the United States more broadly, these attempts often fortify the foundations of whiteness and white supremacy, rather than dismantling them.” She then invited the panelists to respond, and the speakers emphasized the importance of archival research and of finding, curating, and amplifying Black creativity, experience, and thought.

Although archival work is undeniably essential, the near absence in the responses of new or alternative theoretical models (new or alternative to opera scholars and musicologists) was concerning, as if scholars did not need critical tools that specifically address subjects, objects, and people that have hitherto been neglected by the field of opera studies. And the fact that all the speakers on the panel presented as white (although not their responsibility or fault) was of course also concerning. What does it say about the field of opera studies? How should opera studies move forward, bringing the music of marginalized figures and communities out from what André might call the “shadows” while also addressing the field’s lack of BIPOC representation?

Before giving the impression that I am somehow not implicated in these issues, I would like to juxtapose these questions with an experience I had a year earlier. As is well known, in 2019, in an attempt to respond to its own dearth of Black representation, another large and powerful institution, the Metropolitan Opera, mounted a production of *Porgy and Bess*, the first at the house since 1990. As André (2017; 2019) and others have pointed out, the opera’s depiction of Blackness is profoundly problematic; but it is also a piece beloved by Black audiences. I attended several of the performances and then hosted a Black musicologist and friend from out of town who also wanted to attend. Following the performance, my friend disclosed to me that the performance haunted and disturbed him: performers willingly inhabiting minstrel stereotypes; Black singers given an otherwise rare opportunity to appear on the Met stage; and most devastating, spectators looking past these issues to revel in a moment of Black excellence. I responded by trying to exonerate *Porgy*, condemning what I had seen on stage, but justifying my enjoyment by making arguments about

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Gershwin's music and referring to a selection of recordings of the opera that I have long loved. I retreated behind my academese and the pleasures of recorded sound. I even implied that my marginalization as a gay opera lover (and a Canadian!) gave me a unique understanding removed from America's history of slavery. I had of course reverted to one of the most established theoretical models in talking about opera and music: privileging "the music itself." I spoke of recordings as if they were simply transparent representations of a performance or the score, rather than carefully crafted artifacts bound up in issues of identity. Needless to say, my reaction offended and harmed my friend, who admitted that he would have to think twice before confiding in me again.

## II: Vampire Portraits, Fleshy Archives, and the "New Racism"

In the second part of this review essay, I will turn to some of the scholarship on opera and race, opera and sound recording, and race and sound, and consider the evident, but not yet explored connections among these three bodies of scholarship. This scholarship offers a variety of ideas and approaches that can be used to address what Spillers described as the "forgetfulness," "reabsorption," and "reappropriation" of race, especially Blackness. I will also suggest models for how opera studies should move forward. A central concern in my discussion will be how to think more critically about the subject of opera and sound recording, and in particular, the investment opera studies and musicology (still) has in divesting music from bodies and race.

The ontology, artistic value, and economy of mechanical reproduction have been vehemently debated since at least the end of the nineteenth century. Walter Benjamin describes what he defines as a work's aura, its initial and ideal essence that cannot be captured outside its original context of creation. Mechanical reproduction removes the artwork's "unique existence at the place where it happens to be." In doing so, Benjamin ([1935] 1982, 218-20) explains that it "emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual." Benjamin (Ibid., 218) revels in the democracy afforded by mechanical reproduction as well as its possibility, noting that "in photography, process reproduction can bring out those aspects of the original that are unattainable to the naked eye yet accessible to the lens, which is adjustable and chooses its angle at will." Like Benjamin with photography, Theodor W. Adorno ([1969] 2002) considers sound recording to have transformative technical and aesthetic potential because it removes distracting visual spectacle, embarrassing

productions, noisy audiences, and the ephemeral nature of operatic performance. After almost two decades of record labels distributing operas using the long-playing record, Adorno claimed that listeners now had the necessary intimacy and control with which to closely study these works.<sup>7</sup> For Benjamin ([1935] 1982, 218), and arguably Adorno, sound recording projects the musical experience into new contexts that offer new possibilities of interaction between the listener and the work; but neither thinker draws critical attention to how the identities of those wielding the lens or microphone might impact the artistic experience. In the form of records, opera has become accessible to those historically not often seen at the American opera house, those who do not often see themselves represented or, if they do, see themselves portrayed as harmful stereotypes. But, rather than being a reprieve, the record can also replicate or reinvent these stereotypes, burying them within itself and then projecting them in new spaces.

More recent explorations of listening and sound recording broaden our understanding of the individual's relationship with a sound recording. Wayne Koestenbaum (1993, 51) revels in the unwieldy and uncontrollable meanings of the record:

Records are tokens of disappearance and comeback; they are also portraits. I think of records as equivalents of the degenerating portrait of Dorian Gray in Oscar Wilde's 1891 novel. A record pretends to be a boundaried, attractive, flattering portrait. But its instabilities, its mysteries, its potentially horrific features, need to be quarantined. The portrait annexes the soul of its beholder and grotesquely mutates it. The portrait is vampiric. It doesn't keep a secret. It blurts out vices. A record can't limit the voice's meaning. A voice, once recorded, doesn't speak the same meanings that it originally intended. Every playing of a record is a liberation of a shut-in meaning—a movement, across the groove's boundary, from silence into sound, from code into clarity. A record carries a secret message, but no one can plan the nature of that secret, and no one can silence the secret once it has been sung.

Koestenbaum draws our attention to the enigmatic qualities of listening as a material experience and the mysterious power of a record. These possibilities escape what Carolyn Abbate (2004) might describe as gnostic reductions. His understanding of the record encourages us to look for the tensions between the work, its performers, and their reproduction. In annexing "the soul of its beholder," a record's "shut-in" meaning may no longer be directly descended from the "original." Koestenbaum's poetics centers the power of the record in the object itself. In doing so, we are left to assume that he overlooks the legions

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of producers, technicians, and performers who decide how to adapt the “live” experience into a mediated one—actors who operate through a web of biases that later thinkers draw our critical attention to.

The recorded presence overlooked by Adorno and exposed as chimeric by Koestenbaum is reinterpreted in Alexander G. Weheliye as Black possibility. What Weheliye (2005, 46) defines as “sonic Afro-modernity” denotes the inextricable, co-creative, and co-constitutive relationship between whiteness and Blackness, “human and inhuman, sound and vision.” Weheliye deconstructs our understanding of the recording as an insufficient copy, or any kind of mediation for that matter. Rather, he argues that it constitutes a completely new entity. Weheliye wants to completely invert our understanding of what constitutes “the original,” sonically and beyond. Drawing on W.E.B Du Bois’s seminal concept of “double consciousness,” Weheliye challenges our teleological understanding of the phonograph and demonstrates how this technology contributed to the creation of the very divisions of “live” versus recorded performance, original sound versus its copy, and white versus Black. However, he argues that by reifying “live” performance, sound recording unleashed Blackness from a state of abjection and helped transform it into a fundamental co-, or perhaps even, original creator in a shifting musico-technical assemblage. What Adorno dismisses from the record, and Koestenbaum opens to the possibility of uncapturable refraction, Weheliye (2005, 46) interprets as “the occasion to think and hear these matters in slightly different versions that do not lose sound or sight of the surplus gift inherent to Afro-diasporic double consciousness.” Redirecting the agency Koestenbaum gives to the record as a vampire portrait instead to the listener, Weheliye (2005, 16) “does not relegate these practices to the apparatus itself, at least not any notion thereof in which technology’s materiality remains anterior to or outside of the machinations of (Black) culture.” Rather, we find ourselves focusing on the horizon of the listener, an approach comparable to Fredrich A. Kittler’s (1999) interpretation of technology as extensions of the creator or listener’s wants and desires, and the social processes those engender.<sup>8</sup>

Much like the concept of the listener’s horizon, Simon Frith (1996, 227 and 205) describes listening as a performance in itself, a process through which the listener interprets the performer within the frame of his, her, or their own experience: “And yet ideologically—as a matter of interpretation and fantasy—

the old values remain (presence, performance, intensity, event), and listening to recorded music becomes contradictory; it is at once public and private, static and dynamic, an experience of both past and present.” Weheliye recontextualizes Frith’s observations within the debate of liveness. For him, the hundred-year-old argument that a mediated performance is inferior to a “live” one is no longer a given (as the dominant ideology still purports); rather both are experienced and interpreted by the listener in the present and informed by his, her, or their past conceptions of a work, performer, and performance.

Drawing on Michel Foucault (1978), Jonathan Sterne makes a parallel intervention in the historiography of sound recording. He (2003, 28) argues that a history of sound recording is inseparable from a history of the body, explaining that “the history of sound must move beyond recovering experience to interrogating the conditions under which that experience became possible in the first place. Experiences are themselves variables shaped by the contexts through which they then help their subjects navigate.” Like Kittler, Sterne calls for a contextual approach to the history of sound recording (and sound studies more broadly) one that erodes its immaterial façade. He emphasizes the listening practices of those creating sound recording technologies, including their impact on the sounds and objects those technologies produce.

Sterne’s reinterpretation of sound recording as an extension of listening opens the subject to questions of identity, often overlooked in the early scholarship on sound and technology. Fifteen years before Sterne’s *Audible Past* and contemporaneous with the theoretical work Sterne draws on, Spillers poignantly denounced the violent absence of Black female bodies in our histories and critical praxis in her seminal 1987 essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” Spillers’s writing provides useful tools for thinking about the treatment of identity in the histories and practices of sound recording. She interrogated “the conditions under which that experience became possible in the first place,” tracing it back to the middle passage when Black bodies were violently stripped of their humanity, ungendered, and rendered fungible in the eyes of a system maliciously crafted by their oppressors. Spillers names these undone victims—the flesh—in direct opposition to the body or the liberated human of the colonizers. In an arresting passage, one that is worth quoting at length, she (1987, 446) writes that:

The anatomical specifications of rupture, of altered human tissue, take on the objective description of laboratory prose—eyes beaten out, arms, backs, skulls branded, a left

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jaw, a right ankle, punctured; teeth missing, as the calculated work of iron, whips, chains, knives, the canine patrol, the bullet. These undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color. We might well ask if this phenomenon of marking and branding actually “transfers” from one generation to another, finding its various symbolic substitutions in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moments? As Elaine Scarry describes the mechanisms of torture, these lacerations, woundings, fissures, tears, scars, openings, ruptures, lesions, rendings, punctures of the flesh create the distance between what I would designate a cultural vestibularity and the culture, whose state apparatus, including judges, attorneys, “owners,” “soul drivers,” “overseers,” and “men of God,” apparently colludes with a protocol of “search and destroy.” This body whose flesh carries the female and the male to the frontiers of survival bears in person the marks of a cultural text whose inside has been turned outside. The flesh is the concentration of “ethnicity” that contemporary critical discourses neither acknowledge nor discourse away. It is this “flesh and blood” entity, in the vestibule for “pre-view” of a colonized North America, that is essentially ejected from “The Female Body in Western Culture,” but it makes good theory, or commemorative “herstory” to want to “forget,” or to have failed to realize, that the African female subject, under these historic conditions, is not only the target of rape—in one sense, an interiorized violation of body and mind—but also the topic of specifically externalized acts of torture and prostration that we imagine as the peculiar province of male brutality and torture inflected by other males. A female body strung from a tree limb, or bleeding from the breast on any given day of field work because the “overseer,” standing the length of a whip, has popped her flesh open, adds a lexical and living dimension to the narratives of women in culture and society. This materialized scene of unprotected female flesh—of female flesh “ungendered”—offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations.

Spillers’s notion of the “hieroglyphics of the flesh” demands that we consider the ways in which identity, and specifically embodied Black female identity, operates as the flesh, a plethora of meanings associated with the fungible and abject body. In her analysis, Spillers relates the theory to the process of familial rupture that was central to the slave trade, using this process to deconstruct the naturalized and racialized notion of gender and the “nuclear” family. She ultimately advocates for an intersectional approach to culture and history, one that considers the complex interactions among categories of identity including gender, race, and trauma.<sup>9</sup> Such an approach could usefully be applied to the study of listening to sound recordings, perhaps drawing on Nina Sun Eidsheim’s work on opera and race and how listening shapes technologies and bodies.

Eidsheim (2015; 2019) formulates a meta-theory of listening. For her, works, performers, and experiential knowledge are limit cases that allow us to deconstruct naturalized assumptions about listening; the larger aim is to foster a



more inclusive practice of listening. Her work on racialized sounds locates the idea of race in the listener's ear as opposed to the sounding body. Like Spillers, Eidsheim analyzes moments of trauma to reveal how racialized sounds and bodies are constructed. In her work on opera singers (2019), she draws on interviews with vocal pedagogues to analyze how they project notions of racialized sound onto the bodies of their students, physically entraining them to sound like the teachers' own perceptions of the Other. Unlike André, who uses critical race theory to unearth Black operatic life, Eidsheim uses opera to expose and dismantle oppressive modes of listening.

In the realm of sound recording, Susan Schmidt-Horning, Brian Ward, and Karl Hagstrom Miller have drawn the curtain back on the once invisible technicians and, in the process, address issues of inequity. Although several histories of recorded sound exist, Schmidt-Horning (2013, 6) explains that: "how that [history] happened from the perspective of those engaged in the recording process has remained relatively unexamined." Schmidt-Horning draws upon a series of over seventy interviews to reveal the "tacit knowledge" audio engineers acquired on the job in a rapidly changing industry, and the social skills they developed to manage the artists. While tracing the balance between the engineer's "low position in the recording hierarchy" and the artist's dependence on him to work his "magic," Schmidt-Horning (2013, 9) explicitly states that the music industry has historically been dominated by white men and shows the ways that they cultivated the technologies and practices still used in the studio today. Ward advocates more explicitly on behalf of the racially oppressed. Ward (2003, 11) rejects "the earnest quest for some sort of mythical, hermetically sealed, 'real' Black American music, unadulterated by white influences and untarnished by commercial considerations" and traces how Black artists negotiated the co-constitutive relationship of Blackness and whiteness from the 1950s through the 1970s in the recording studio. Miller (2010) illuminates an earlier period in sound recording history, the 1880s to the 1920s, focusing on the ways in which record industry executives racialized both their artists and their recordings, literally describing products for and by African Americans as race records. But there is more work to be done. The majority of scholarship that explores the impact of identity on listening and the process of recording tends to focus on musical idioms considered fundamentally Black, and intersectional analyses of Western classical music and sound recording remain few.<sup>10</sup>

It is of course well known that opera has a problematic history with representation. Opera's investment in whiteness, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism is not only reflected in the repertoire, but also in the

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lack of diversity on- and off-stage and in the audience.<sup>11</sup> Based on the 2020 census, demographers project that the white population will soon become a minority in the United States (Lu et al. 2021), and yet the opera industry is nowhere near responding to these projections. By perpetuating the belief that opera is eternally relevant despite being polluted with problematic words, images, and sounds, the industry successfully continues to protect its deeply sedimented structures of white privilege.

Saidiya V. Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* (1997) is one of several seminal works that offers tools with which to begin to identify and dismantle this privilege, not only in the opera house, but also in the recording studio. She explores the brutal history of slavery in the United States, but she warns us against sensationalizing this history and its violence: in doing so one can overlook the complex network of power and oppression that has survived. Hartman (1997, 21) is specifically interested in "the desire to don, occupy, or possess Blackness or the Black body as a sentimental resource and/or locus of excess enjoyment [and ...] to consider critically the complicated nexus of terror and enjoyment." Hartman explains that this nexus or dialectic of terror and enjoyment derives from the plantation, where slaves were forced, whipped, and terrorized to dance and sing to give the impression of happiness, wellbeing, satisfaction, and ultimately naturalness in bondage. Hartman argues that this torture-cum-entertainment was not abolished with slavery, but rather transformed and adapted into new and more insidious forms in the United States. Her arguments demand that we think about the ways that the nexus of terror and enjoyment was passed down through the generations, physically, emotionally, and systemically, and perpetuated in white institutions, including the opera house and the recording studio.

Hartman's writing has already been a significant source of inspiration for scholars on Blackness and music. Matthew D. Morrison (2017, 15), for example, has explained that her work compels him "to amplify how the sounds of Black people, Blackness, and the (commodified) embodiment of the two within popular entertainment are key to how identities are constructed and how these formations continue to shape our society." Morrison (2017; 2019) builds on Hartman's ideas by developing a concept specifically for music that he calls *Blacksound* (2017, 18), which he defines as follows:

A theory of historical embodiment to trace the ephemerality and materiality of the sounds produced by Black bodies within the history of popular music in the United States. The concept allows for the consideration of how Black bodies and their myriad aesthetic practices have been subjected through spectacular and quotidian popular

performances during enslavement, through emancipation, and persisting into the structuring of our (post)modern economies of popular entertainment and identity.

Developed further in relation to nineteenth-century minstrel performance, Blacksound is a notion that centers the issue of domination in American cultural objects and seriously considers the re-instantiation of nineteenth-century racist musical traditions in contemporary performance practices.

While Morrison's notion of Blacksound has only just begun to be applied to opera, Thurman's work on the Black operatic voice (2012; 2019) offers a model for how scholars might explore the dialectic of terror and enjoyment in the art form.<sup>12</sup> Her research on soprano Grace Bumbry's tenure as the first Black woman at Wagner's *Festspielhaus* in Bayreuth, where she appeared as Venus in Wagner's *Tannhäuser*, draws attention to the creativity and pleasure of the episode and Bumbry's fear for her physical safety. Thurman also exposes how racism was often disguised as maintaining tradition or defending the sanctity of Wagner's operas and opera in general.

The literature explored thus far encourages us to examine how opera, and opera recordings, might replicate, transform, and create new racial boundaries. When it comes to developments in opera's technological mediation in the last ten years (streaming, YouTube, the phenomenon of "Live-in-HD," and so on), Patricia Hill Collins's (2004, 32) idea of "the new racism," which she outlines in her book *Black Sexual Politics*, could be particularly useful. For Collins, "the problem of the twenty-first century seems to be the seeming absence of a color line. Formal legal discrimination has been outlawed, yet contemporary social practices produce virtually identical racial hierarchies as those observed by Du Bois"—in other words, from over a century earlier. Collins explores the survival and transformation of racism during the course of the rapid economic and technological developments of the 1990s, such as in hip-hop music videos. She (2004, 31) observes that:

Camera angles routinely are shot from a lower position than the rapper in question, giving the impression that he is looming over the viewer. In real life, being this close to young African American men who were singing about sex and violence and whose body language included fists, angry gestures, and occasional crotch-grabbing might be anxiety provoking for the typical rap and hip-hop consumer (most are suburban White adolescents). Yet viewing these behaviors safely packaged within a music video protects consumers from any possible contact with Black men who are actually in the videos. Just who are these videos for? What are the imagined race, gender, and sexual orientations of the viewers?

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Collins explicitly raises the issue of racism and technological mediation, in this case observing how the music videos are curated for an imagined white audience. Her observations about the positionality of the viewer suggest that scholars might want to think about late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century media as a new form of segregation. In a time when performance spaces are being radically redefined, including in opera, Collins warns us about the new and more insidious guises in which the “hieroglyphics of the flesh” might appear.

Taking a more historical approach, and drawing again on Du Bois, Jennifer Lynn Stoever (2016, 18) proposes the concept of the “sonic color line” and uses it to scrutinize the “process of racializing sound—how and why certain bodies are expected to produce, desire, and live amongst particular sounds—and its product, the hierarchical division between ‘whiteness’ and ‘Blackness.’” Stoever (2016, 7) draws together several seemingly isolated examples of Black sound creation from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and uses the idea of “the listening ear” as a figure for “how dominant listening practices accrue—and change—over time, as well as a descriptor for how the dominant culture exerts pressure on individual listening practices to conform to the sonic color line’s norms.” Stoever’s ideas are potentially extremely useful for scrutinizing whiteness and its related practices of listening. She (2016, 53) also emphasized the importance of uncovering “potential sites of freedom and resistance that evade the sonic color line and the listening ear.”

There is a similar emphasis foregrounding both resistance and liberation in the historical past in the work of André and Denise Von Glahn (2020, 714), who use the term “shadow culture narratives” to refer to “how women’s histories—especially histories of women of color—exist in the shadows of the conventional white (and Black) narrative norms.” Daphne Brooks in her most recent book *Liner Notes for the Revolution* (2021, 43) has meanwhile used the term “subterranean blues” to articulate “how central Black women musicians are to modernity and, likewise, how modernity and its cultural archives [have] repeatedly betray[ed] these artists, the conduits of ‘nurturing, healing, life and love giving for the majority culture,’ as well as their own legacies.”

Brooks, André, and Collins have all advocated on behalf of Black feminist thought and have drawn particular attention to the importance of “lived experience” in their scholarly work on Blackness and race. For Brooks, Black archives are a crucial space to find and study this lived experience in the past; however traditional scholarly notions of the archive need to be reassessed and reimagined. Brooks asks us to broaden our traditional notion of the archive. She (2021, 4) wants us to:

[take] seriously the notion of the archive—both the documentary record preserved by institutional powerbrokers and the faded pages we might imagine stored in an elderly sister’s trunk—as a crucial, culture-making entity that Black women musicians and critics have had to negotiate in relation to their own artistic ambitions and to the problem of Black historical memory more broadly. Black women artists have played crucial roles as archives, as the innovators of performances and recordings that stood in for and as the memory of a people. Though often trivialized and minimized for their import, their cultural acts have amounted to a potent and forthright response to the class in control of libraries and universities, the publishing apparatuses and the awards councils, the film industries and the television industries, which saw fit to merely use up and dispose of the sounds created by Black people—to say nothing of the cycles upon cycles of “love and theft” [(Lott 1993, 6)] that resulted in the obliteration of the history from whence these sounds first came. As archives, these Black women artists have operated through their music as the repositories of the past. Just as well, however, they have often engaged in active projects to archive their own creative practices, to document the intellectual and creative processes tied to their music, all of which, as we shall see, amounts to a Black feminist intellectual history in sound that has thus far gone unmarked and unheralded.

Brooks reminds us that omission or exclusion in the academy is not only due to a lack of appropriate methodological models, but also to the scope of what scholars are trained to believe is worth researching. Brooks explains that one issue is finding and re-evaluating Black archives. Another is what to do when you find little or nothing at all. In the latter case, Brooks urges scholars to listen to contemporary Black poets and canonic literary figures such as Toni Morrison to learn from their approaches to historical or archival absence and silence. She (2021, 40) explains that:

genius poets like [Fred] Moten [(2003)] and [Nathanial] Mackey [(1992)] have made such dazzling inroads in Black sound studies by altogether pushing the language that we use to talk about the prodigious complexity of Black music, the magnitude of its weight and depth. The field-altering work that Mackey and Moten have each executed by way of issuing what amounts to a series of poetically rendered correctives—about, for instance, the presumed “legibility” and tenacious resonances of Black sound—are crucial to any study of modern sonic culture because their work forces us to confront with, among other things, the long historical arc of Black phonic meaning that precedes, rivals, and runs parallel to the characters whose acts are “really happening” in Marcus’s study. [...] And still here, we might think of the ways that my dear brothers, too—as they would surely agree—follow a Black feminist model of formalistic philosophizing, the kind of which Morrison [(2004, xvii)] speaks when she talks of the importance of “getting language out of the way” in her approach to writing about slavery and its afterlives. The majesty and invention of her speculative prose revolutionized Black Studies thought as well as the style and content of said thought for the last half century. I, too, follow the Morrisonian path of the speculative at key

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points, drawing inspiration from Hartman and others as well so as to open up our relationship to the depths of the opaque Black sonic past.

What Brooks calls “the Morrisonian path of the speculative” has been notably pursued by Hartman in response to what Brooks has described as “the opaque Black sonic past.” In her brilliant *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (2019), Hartman takes a radical approach, telling a history of Black female life in the early-twentieth century that weaves together the limited evidence she has found and fills in the gaps with the methodology she has developed over decades, what she has described as “critical fabulation.” Hartman takes the term “intimate histories” seriously, using speculation and a partly personal literary approach to invite the reader into the private lives and also the minds and feelings of a series of Black radical women. As scholars, we are trained to remove ourselves from, or at least conceal ourselves in, our writing and analysis. Scholars such as Hartman have suggested that it is also worth asking what *not* removing ourselves might do.

While Brooks, Hartman, and Collins foreground lived experience in their work, scholars such as Nahum Chandler and Sylvia Wynter make meta-discursive arguments, deconstructing and recomposing fundamental notions about race and categorization. Wynter (2003), for example, strives to expose and deconstruct the hegemony of “Man” in favor of a new theory, system, or concept of humanity that might account for a plethora of gendered and racialized categories. She shows how historical narratives tend to privilege white men and construct other identities as inferior. Chandler, by contrast, places himself in the lineage of Du Bois and seeks to unsettle or “desediment” historicized and essentialized notions of race. In a dense but important passage in his *X—The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought*, Chandler (2014, 43) writes that:

A tracking of the problem of the Negro for thought exposes, then, the fault lines within the layers of sedimentations that have gradually gathered as the very historicity of modern thought. These fault lines, and the shiftings that they both register and make possible, direct us toward an instability in the architectonics of any thought, or thought as practice, that would simply declare its position with regard to the question of essence (especially, for example, as the question of the status of the sign or under the heading of another term such as the symbolic), whether it be of origin or end, or of the universal or of the particular.

In a manner similar to Weheliye, Chandler questions the distinction between origin and derivative, but on a much larger scale. Chandler asks us to uncover the process of “sedimentation” by which the idea of race has become historically

naturalized. To do this, scholars must excavate what he describes as the “fault lines”: the moments when a concept or “truth” was established. It is there that we can analyze how that belief came to be and then possibly rectify it. Chandler sees the process of excavation as an opportunity to uncover a neglected horizon. For him (2014, 60-1):

Du Bois’s naming of the African American as a figure of double identification, “an American,” “a Negro,” neither of which one disavows, both of which one maintains, in a certain way, can be understood (to the extent that it is never simply or only double, if the double could ever mean that) to name the heterogeneous gathering that attends any formation or postulation of identity or figure of sameness. Du Bois’s formulation would be an example of the double gesture. [...] For, in the interval, the space or spacing that opens between tactic and end, arises the possibility of something other than what has been, something other than the simple repetition of the past in the future. It would be in such an interval that the problem of the Negro as a problem for thought becomes something other than simply or only the problem of the Negro, if there is such.

Chandler rethinks how we approach the construction of race and in doing so creates space for Black agency where possibility is usually overlooked, appropriated, or eviscerated. Such a re-thinking or, to use Chandler’s term, a doubling, calls for new, hybrid, alternative research methods to respectfully handle subjects, materials, and topics that intersect with issues of race and all the histories (BIPOC and white) that are entwined with it.

### **III: “Selling” it: Listening to *Porgy and Bess***

In a conversation with Hartman, Griffin, Shelly Eversley, and Jennifer L. Morgan, Spillers (2007, 306-7) cautioned them about the current state of racial and gender activism in the United States. She warned, “we have reached one of the most dangerous periods in American history, and it is borne on the back of the civil rights and feminist movements that was spearheaded by Black people and radical white people and that has now been co-opted by neofascist forces in this society. You can now sell it.” Although I am (again) taking a risk by putting this in print, I am inspired by Spillers’s warning to return to the Metropolitan Opera’s 2019 production of *Porgy and Bess* to consider not the production itself, but the commercial civic initiatives that surrounded and emanated from it. I must begin by stating that I think the production can be thought of as an example of Spillers’s “selling” of the civil rights movements and Blackness more generally because, with the exception of Camille A. Brown, who choreographed *Porgy and Bess*, and of course the singers, no Black creatives were given leading roles in the

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production. In the final section of this review essay, I would like to focus on two of the projects adjacent to and that contributed to the production's "selling" of Black activism: the "Black Voices at the Met" exhibition, mounted in 2019 on the house's sub-floor, and especially the accompanying sound recording, *Black Voices Rise: African American Artists at the Met, 1955–1985*; and the "live" recording of *Porgy and Bess* released in 2019 (which won the 2021 Grammy Award for "Best Opera Recording").

The "Black Voices at the Met" exhibit was the Met's celebration of Black operatic talent at the house, and also an attempt to acknowledge the house's problematic history of segregation, use of Blackface, and other failings. The accompanying recording, *Black Voices Rise*, is revealing. According to an "official" description (on the Met Opera Shop website), the compilation "showcases live performances by some of the nation's most celebrated and history-making singers," beginning with contralto Marian Anderson, who famously crossed the Met's color line on January 7, 1955.<sup>13</sup> Unlike the exhibition (which ranged from the Jim Crow era to the end of the twentieth century), the recording ends after only thirty years, in 1985. As such, *Black Voices Rise* chronicles the performance history of Black artists at the Met during the heights of the civil rights and Black Power movements. It also, in effect, exposes that relatively few Black performers appeared (and were recorded) in leading roles at the house in the last three decades. The relative scarcity of high-profile Black stars at the Met in the late-twentieth and early-twentieth first centuries could more easily be glossed over in the original "Black Voices" exhibition, which drew on primarily visual sources (for example, playbills and photographs). This issue has yet to receive any scholarly attention, but it was raised at the time by one of the Met's 1960s and 70s Black stars, the soprano Shirley Verrett in the 1999 documentary *Aida's Brothers and Sisters*. Verrett observed that:

We're going backwards. We're going back to where it was. Now I don't know because I'm not at the Met now, I was there almost twenty-five years and I thought that at that time when [Leontyne] Price, [Grace] Bumbry, Martina [Arroyo]—there were not that many of us, even at that time—but we were there on a regular basis. [...] But now, who is there? [...] I don't know really what can be done about it because during the years that we were all there. [...] there were many people that did not want to see us there, but we did help to sell tickets.

Along with the soprano Barbara Hendricks and the tenor George Shirley, who were also interviewed for the documentary, Verrett connected the trickle of high-



profile performers to a diminished interest in and awareness of the ongoing Black social and political struggle.

Unlike *Black Voices Rise*, which consists of excerpts from “live” performances, the Met’s 2019 recording of *Porgy and Bess* is a conglomeration of two “live” performances (specifically September 23 and October 16). Although this approach is a common tactic for recording opera, it raises the question of who determines which performances are most artistically appropriate and for whom. How does this person (or more likely people) hear *Porgy and Bess*—a complex question if one considers the echoes of minstrelsy in this opera? What is their identity, their positionality? And what is the assumed identity and positionality of the imagined listener? These questions are not often considered when consuming recorded operas, traditionally imagined as transparent representations of the score or a performance. Indeed, for many, the recording allows one to bypass the physical and visual world of the stage *à la* Adorno and imagine an ideal performance. In the privacy of one’s own home, or on public transit, or walking outside, one can conjure fantastic bodiless voices, or breathe life into the two-dimensional bodies on the record cover, or draw upon the last performance he, she, or they saw—or even imagine oneself to be the performer.

There is a connection to be made here with Collins’s diagnosis of “the new racism.” In the last two decades, spectators no longer need to pay for an expensive front-row seat at the Met to get close to the performers. They can now go to a movie theatre for the intimate “Live-in-HD” experience or even stream performances from the Met at home. These performances are curated with intimate close-ups and these images can be consumed without the performer or any spectators around you witnessing your reactions. As Collins (2004, 31) has argued with reference to video performances of hip-hop artists, Black male and female images “could now enter private white spaces, one step safely removed because these were no longer live performances and Black men no longer appeared in the flesh. These technological advances enabled the reworking of Black male sexuality that became much more visible, yet was safely contained.” Is there a parallel set of arguments to be made about operatic images—and sounds? Does the “Live-in-HD” or the recorded experience give the observer the power to curate his, her, or their own operatic experience and, by extension, its connection to or expression of race?

In an attempt to apply some of the theoretical ideas I have discussed, I would like to think in more detail about how sound recordings construct an imagined listener by focusing on a few moments from the Met’s “live” recording. One of the most powerful—and problematic—moments in *Porgy and Bess*

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occurs at the end of Act III, when Bess (soprano) succumbs again to the drug “happy dust,” leaving behind Clara’s baby and her attempt at a new life. Spillers’s theory of “the hieroglyphics of the flesh,” the concept that stereotypes of Blackness are carved from a history of violence and subjugation and then projected back on to Black bodies, is particularly productive for thinking about this scene. When Bess finally submits to Sportin’ Life (tenor) and takes a hit of “happy dust,” the orchestra builds to a climax dominated by Sportin’ Life’s dance-like theme. The theme is incredibly catchy, and the performers are often actually instructed to dance, as in the famous 1976 Houston Grand Opera production starring Clamma Dale as Bess and again in the San Francisco Opera production from 2009. When they do, the scene is almost overwhelmed by one of the minstrel stereotypes that the opera draws upon, the “sexy Jezebel” who actively desires sexual relations with men. In a documentary for the San Francisco production, David Gockley, the Houston Grand Opera director, recalled that the audience went wild at this moment (when Bess-Dale emerged from the house and then proceeded to dance with Sportin’ Life, performed by tenor Larry Marshall). There is no filmed record, but the 1976 RCA studio recording leaves little to the imagination as Bess-Dale whoops and cries in response to Sportin’ Life’s encouragement. The Jezebel stereotype is sonically reinscribed.

In the 2019 Met production, the moment is staged differently. James Robinson, the director, does not have Bess dance with Sportin’ Life; rather she follows him off stage in a drug-induced haze. It is a clear attempt to make Bess appear less “willing” and more “dignified”—one that is somewhat undermined by the fact that immediately before the director has Bess offer to give Sportin’ Life a blowjob (?!). On the Met recording there are no extra-musical cues to communicate this to the listener. Given the history of the opera’s staging, and the dance-like theme itself, should—does—the listener imagine dance and movement at this moment? Or does he, she, or they hear this as more pathetic and dignified?

A different kind of example is in Act II of *Porgy and Bess*, when the street vendors sell their wares at the dawn of a new day in Catfish Row. The moment is atmospheric and establishes a sense of local color, with each vendor singing a variation on the same theme set to African-American Vernacular English (which can potentially sound like minstrelsy if performed in an exaggerated manner). The first is the strawberry woman who announces, “Oh dey’s so fresh an’ fine, an’ dey’s jus off de vine, strawberry,” sung on the recording by the soprano Leah Hawkins. Despite the vernacular nature of the scene and its music, Hawkins

shows off her skills as a coloratura and steps into a long tradition of altering the musical line by singing the final repetition of “strawberry” in alt, taking the simple phrase up the octave to a high D and E—now the highest notes performed in the opera. With this alteration, Hawkins defies our expectations of a quaint, simple, sleepy morning in Catfish Row, transporting us from minstrelsy to grand opera, and the 2019 audience captured on record loudly applauds Hawkins’s feat.

The moment is immediately followed by the crab salesman, sung in 2019 by the tenor Chauncey Packer, who announces “I’m talkin’ about devil crabs, I’m talkin’ about de food I sells.” Packer clearly executes the vocal slides, written by Gershwin to evoke what he believed was authentic Black music-making, and accompanies his singing with comical and exaggerated gestures. The audience enjoys the moment and the contrast with Hawkins, laughing along—laughter that is included on the recording. The juxtaposition reminds one sonically of what Jennifer Bloomquist (2015, 422) has described as “the push-pull” of the African-American experience and African-American expressive culture, being at once celebrated, appropriated, and exploited—in this case in the course of only a few minutes within a single scene. It would be interesting to know more about how scenes like this one were put together. What role did the performers play in relation to *Porgy*’s primarily white creative team? What kind of spectator and response was imagined? What discussions were had and which decisions were made when transforming *Porgy* into a primarily sonic (rather than theatrical and audiovisual) experience?

Perhaps counterintuitively, I would like finally to turn to dance in the Met’s *Porgy and Bess* recording, and the approach and importance of the choreographer Brown. A Tony-nominated choreographer, Brown was the only Black person on the production’s creative team of seven (which also included James Robinson [production], Michael Yeargan [set designer], Catherine Zuber [costume designer], Donald Holder [lighting designer], Luke Halls [production designer], and David Leong [fight director]). The choreography in *Porgy and Bess* is crucial to how the characters are portrayed, and although it is usually created to be seen, traces can be heard on a “live” recording or even be a source of special sonic effects, as on the Houston Grand Opera recording. Working with the cast, many of whom are not trained dancers, Brown claimed to be tapping into the performers’ “blood memory,” echoing Brooks’s idea of Black women as vocal and bodily archives. Approaching the Black body in general as an archive, Brown explained in an interview for *Playbill* between the 2019 Fall and Spring runs of *Porgy and Bess* that: “Movement is such a strong part of African-American culture [...] We have all of this history in our bodies, and I wanted the

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cast to tap into that. Everyone has a very specific view of what dance is—the turns, the spins, the flips—but there’s also another side of dance that comes from the Black experience that is inside each one of us.” The result was a choreography that, in the surprisingly evocative description by the *New York Times* critic Anthony Tommasini (not usually known for his dance criticism) is “highly stylized,” a “daring” and “intricate” vision of “stomping feet and flailing arms.”

Tommasini (2019) goes on to explain that, though effective on its own terms, Brown’s approach at times sits uneasily within the Met production, which is designed by Robinson “to reveal the dignity of the characters.” In other words, the emphasis on an uninhibited physicality can at times end up reinforcing some of the opera’s ideas and stereotypes, and this effect is intensified in the recording, where much of the choreography survives only as shouts, bangs, and other extra-musical sounds. One example is Sportin’ Life’s “It ain’t necessarily so” in Act II, one of the most popular numbers in the opera and one that borrows a great deal from minstrelsy. In the number Sportin’ Life shares his cynical view of religion in a call and response with the chorus, and in the 2019 production Brown has the singers accompany the tenor’s quasi-sermon with dance, including synchronized snapping and stomping and playful yells and gasps. The choreography has echoes of minstrelsy, particularly in its evocation of the Cakewalk (which was regularly performed by Black performers in minstrel shows in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). In the recording these echoes, or rather the potential for the number to simply reinforce minstrel stereotypes, are intensified because the choreography is now reduced primarily to extra-musical sounds.

## Conclusion

These are just a handful of examples of how one might approach a recording such as *Porgy and Bess*. My brief suggestions and analyses could be the starting point for larger projects: a history of sound recording that focuses on how race has impacted the technology used to record opera and the process more generally; a record label case study, perhaps from key eras such as the 1960s and 70s or our current decade; and even a study analyzing a single recording and its relationship to race across several decades. Such projects would not only focus on previously overlooked perspectives, experiences, voices, and bodies, they would also contribute to the larger goal of much of the scholarship I have explored in this review essay: deconstructing the very idea of race itself. Despite no longer seeing the physical body, we still racialize sound when we listen to a

sound recording, especially a recording of opera, a thoroughly embodied art form even when those bodies are absent. To begin to understand such issues better, musicologists need to expand their view to enthusiastically consider writing outside of musicology, particularly radical scholarship in Black studies. They also need to foster a profession that welcomes, listens, and respects BIPOC individuals and their lived experiences.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Critical race theory” is currently the focus of much anger and confusion in the United States and beyond. The term refers to the large body of thought and scholarship that built on the pioneering work of Black legal scholars including Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and others in the 1980s. Such scholarship typically departs from the premise that race is a social construct and is intersectional (in other words, it cannot be understood without also thinking about gender, class, and other categories). The ultimate aim of such scholarship, as Richard Delgado notes, is to change the relationship “among race, racism, and power.” For more, see Cobb 2021.

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Karen Henson, Emily Wilbourne, Samuel Teeple, and Robert Wrigley for their time and extensive feedback on earlier versions of this essay.

<sup>3</sup> For the AMS’s response to the murder of George Floyd, see Cusick 2020.

<sup>4</sup> For more detail about the offerings at the AMS/SMT meeting, see the 2020 program: [https://cdn.ymaws.com/ams-net.site-ym.com/resource/resmgr/files/virtual2020/final\\_guides/ams-smt\\_program-guide\\_2020-1.pdf](https://cdn.ymaws.com/ams-net.site-ym.com/resource/resmgr/files/virtual2020/final_guides/ams-smt_program-guide_2020-1.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> For more on the relationship between the AMS/musicology and race, see Dolan and Lewis 2018, Levitz 2012 and 2018. For more on the marginalization of BIPOC communities beyond musicology, see Ahmed 2012.

<sup>6</sup> In a blog post for *Musicology Now*, Carol Oja traces the history of the AMS’s Committee for Cultural Diversity. Her work demonstrates that race and intersectionality has been a problem at the AMS since the 1990s. See, Oja 2021.

<sup>7</sup> For a more thorough analysis of Adorno’s writing on the phonograph and its racial implications, see Moten 2017, 118-133.

<sup>8</sup> For the impact Kittler’s ideas about technology have had on musicology, see Rehding et al. 2017.

<sup>9</sup> For more on intersectionality, see Crenshaw 1991 and Collins 2019. For a compelling overview of Black feminist thought, see the Introduction and Chapter 1 of Weheliye 2014 and Brooks 2021.

<sup>10</sup> It was brought to my attention by the editor that another burgeoning area of research on race and sound recording are the biographies on early-twentieth-century Black recording artists. An important example is Shana Redmond’s *Everything Man: The Form and Function of Paul Robeson*. Redmond (2020, 9) explains that: “While this book is about Robeson, he is

less subject than opportunity for an experiment that attends to crucial questions of representation and form through examinations of the multitextual, technological, and international afterlife of Black political cultures in the long twentieth century.” Redmond uses Robeson’s biography as a case study to explore the ways that his voice and body were mediated by and (re)presented in recordings.

<sup>11</sup> For more on the history of opera and race, see Henson 2021.

<sup>12</sup> For an example of Morrison’s Blacksound in opera studies, see Wilbourne 2020.

<sup>13</sup> See the Met Opera Shop Website: <https://www.metoperashop.org/shop/black-voices-rise-african-american-artists-at-the-met-19551985-cd-22775>.

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