

“A Woman Is a Sometime Thing”: (Re)Covering Black Womanhood in *Porgy and Bess*

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This essay reexamines the legendary opera-musical Porgy and Bess by first tending to its origins in the dual phenomenon of early 1920s racialized sonic experimentation and the Southern literary conceits of DuBose Heyward, author of the 1925 novel Porgy on which the theater production was based. It traces the ways in which Heyward and George Gershwin’s undertheorized fascination with “the vice of Black womanhood” effectively shaped the form and the content of a work often referred to as “America’s most famous opera,” and it ultimately considers the ways that Black women artists navigated, complicated, and transformed the charged aesthetics of a Porgy and Bess. Their performance labor ultimately subverts an archetype whose novel roots threatened to circumscribe their representational and artistic possibility.

We are being teased, abruptly invited to linger for no more than a moment in the billowy flutter of a flirtatious trill. So we begin in the register of both seduction and weariness, a clarinet glissando synonymous with the languor and steaminess of precoital mating calls, of postcoital exhaustion and other bedroom rituals moves swiftly out the window of cramped tenement housing into the bustling streets below where European immigrant hustle meets the grandeur of metropolitan possibility framed by “colorline” encounters, charged interracial socialites, and the dizzying opportunity to make art and commerce out of this noisy urban “experiment.”

Perhaps Leonard Bernstein’s 1959 version of George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* is closer to being “a sonic manifestation of the American Dream”¹ than the original performance was, but Gershwin famously participated in this kind of mythmaking from the start: that is, from 1924, when orchestra leader Paul Whiteman premiered the work at New York City’s Aeolian Hall. It’s the rhythms of a locomotive, Gershwin would insist years later, that shook something loose in him while traveling from New York to Boston, sparking in him a vision of “a definite plot of the piece... a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America,” a symphonic rendering of a “vast melting pot, our unduplicated national pep, or of blues, our metropolitan madness.”²

Only mildly implicit here is the suggestion that the shtetl and the ghetto, so to speak, would have to mix it up in this piece in order to capture this “modern” moment like lightning in a bottle. Son of Russian immigrants George Gershwin’s remarks attest to this, just as early jazz history’s well-known tales of racial proximities, cultural expropriations, “black skin and white noise” forever remind us.

But it’s that opening phrase, that glissando, a citational gesture that swiftly threads together New Orleans woodwind lyricism with klezmer ascent, that holds my attention, fascinates and frustrates me, and is the key to understanding something deeply submerged yet central to what would become the most influential, most well-known, most lasting, lauded, beloved yet persistently controversial, and also loathed work in the Gershwin archive, the 1935 “folk opera” *Porgy and Bess*.

That 1924 Gershwin sound is, to me, *everything*: the synecdoche to the secret history of Black womanhood and sonic modernity that yet still receives scant mention in Gershwin studies and in studies of cultural modernisms more broadly. That sound is to me the place where literary critic Michael North’s classic claims about white “linguistic rebellion through racial ventriloquism” meet up with African American literature scholar Farah Griffin’s equally landmark observations about the “spectacle” of sonic Black women as the hinge by which a nation comes to define itself as resuscitated and renewed, as resilient, shiny, and new. It is the sound of a racially and gendered idea about jazz, about America’s “modern” music that white male composers, conductors, and critics would cook up together in tux and tails, deep in the heart of the 1920s concert hall, a place where they could sublimate all sorts of complicated impulses, ideologies, and desires in putative pursuit of their own self-aggrandizing innovation.³

This musical moment is where everything jumps off, where the “dialect of modernism” (pace North) diverges to such an extent that we are hearing neither pure mimicry nor excessively aestheticized, Steinish racial masquerade but rather a staged encounter between the composer and the racially feminized personification of this music whose name bears the markings of sexual derisiveness (“jis” becomes “jazz”) conjured up by outsiders.⁴ This is the launching pad where the women of the so-called slum, the sisters who cut an “errant path” through the city as Saidiya Hartman has so beautifully shown us, those sisters who remain “abstracted dark forms” in the archive that is also the white cultural imaginary, take shape as sonic allegory and come aurally into view in this orchestrated *Rhapsody*.⁵ This is the moment, then, when George Gershwin and Charleston, South Carolina, novelist DuBose Heyward would begin to call out to each other through and across the figure of Black womanhood in their work for the next eleven years.

What’s new to some ears strikes my own as something more nagging, a musical figuration of Blackness and womanhood subtending this sonic rapture, a kind of wretched enchantment inasmuch as it signals the sound of 1920s white

musicians’ racialized and gendered approaches to jazz as a self-indulgent exercise in “conquest and discipline.” Think of esteemed music critic Walter Damsrosch’s infamous line in the program notes to Gershwin’s 1925 *Concerto in F* (which I thank my friend and colleague Brian Kane for sharing with me) that traffics in white patriarchal clichés, the intent to “make a lady out of jazz.” Or consider critic Deems Taylor’s review in the immediate wake of the *Rhapsody* concert in which he mused that “Mr. Gershwin will bear watching . . . he may yet bring jazz out of the kitchen.”⁶

Yet the “kitchen,” as we know, “was the field and the brothel,” thus making it ever more clear that if jazz “is a woman,” as many a musician (from Whiteman to Ellington) would suggest across the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, if jazz was either a “hot thing” to be “tamed” or provincial servant awaiting her Pygmalion-esque calibration and transformation, if this was the undercurrent of “modern music” ideologies framing the conditions of Gershwin’s rise among the ranks of popular composers, then it stands to reason that one could draw a parallel between what he was up to in his “rapturous” transduction of ideas about gendered Blackness with that of DuBose Heyward’s oft-overlooked yet egregiously disturbing figuration of Black womanhood in his 1925 novel *Porgy*.⁷

Though I begin with these imaginings conjured up by this cadre of white male artists, the renderings of and references to Black women and Black female iconicity often with, early on, nary a Black woman thinker of any sort in the room with them, the larger context of my essay would have to include the recentering of the avant-garde practices of Black women culture workers – vocalists, musicians, actors, playwrights, and arrangers – who not only managed but who also, for some eighty-five years now, actively adapted, translated, and rearranged an archive of concatenate cultural works: *Porgy* the novel (written by Heyward in 1925), *Porgy* the play (cowritten by Heyward and his dramatist wife Dorothy in 1927), and the opera that Gershwin, lyricist brother Ira, as well as Heyward would bring to the Broadway stage in 1935.⁸

What other work comes to mind that presents a series of affective and aesthetic claims about Black womanhood and manifests itself across literary, dramatic, and musical forms and has so persistently captured the cultural imagination on so vast a global scale and for such a long-lasting period of time? Perhaps there will come a day when Toni Morrison’s prodigious meditation on the afterlives of slavery will rightly assume this title.⁹ But for now, we are left with *Porgy and Bess*, an opera that once was a novel, and continues to spin out a mythical novel of its own.

Oh yes, *Porgy and Bess*. To be sure, Black folks have been wrestling with the musical-theater-meets-operatic whale since the show’s 1935 debut: celebrating it as J. Rosamond Johnson (James Weldon Johnson’s bro) did when he called it “a monument to the cultural aims of the Negro” (he also had a small part in the show); chastising it as Duke Ellington did when he infamously declared that “The

times are here to debunk Gershwin's lampblack Negroisms"; or trying to reject it altogether, as did Sidney Poitier unsuccessfully when the role of Porgy was offered to him in the ill-fated 1959 Otto Preminger train wreck film adaptation.¹⁰

As music scholar Gwynne Kuhner Brown points out in her fine work on the collaborative history of *Porgy and Bess*, this is a show that African American performers "have . . . engaged . . . from the beginning: helping to create and shape it in a variety of ways, taking roles or refusing them, and deepening" our "understanding of its various meanings through analysis, criticism and commentary."¹¹ The grooves in the archival record reveal the extent to which Black actors and vocalists return again and again to *Porgy and Bess*: a grandly ambitious symphonic experiment in both racial mimicry as well as interracial encounter, a dual dynamic that begs for active forms of critical listening.

From its earliest performances when the libretto was riddled with the "N-bomb" to its most recent and "controversial" 2012 revival as musical theater on the Great White Way, *Porgy and Bess* is a show that continues to both trouble and encapsulate American culture's canonical tales of racial aesthetic power and appropriation to such an extent that post-civil rights era Black casts and, much more often than not, their white directors have had to negotiate its terms like a theatrical SALT treaty.¹²

Which begs the question: why bother? And more to the point, what specifically does this text offer Black women performers who played the legendary role of Bess and transformed that character's sonic repertoire into an alluring, abstract riddle, a sociopolitical, cultural, historical, and aesthetic problem as well as an opportunity? If, as opera critic Burton Fisher argues, the "composer of opera or 'music drama,' becomes the 'dramatist' and 'narrator' of the story through the music," then it should be ever so clear that these women were counter-composers as well as arrangers, artists who have remained committed to "disobeying" the constrictions of the "script" handed to them, yet nearly never in theater histories of *Porgy and Bess* referred to as such.¹³

As adapters, translators, and arrangers in their own right, these were artists who interpolated their own interpretative vision into a work that asked both everything and nothing of them aesthetically, that required them to dwell in the violence of plantation time while drawing on the virtuosity and risk of a sonic cosmopolite. They were artists who employed a whole range of performance strategies that subtly and yet consistently turned the *Porgy and Bess* archive of content and multigeneric forms into their own objects of inquiry, thus enabling them, in turn, to produce their own rhapsodic proclamations of the "new" and to, likewise, announce a patent refusal to sustain the "regime of brutality so normalized" within the Gershwin and Heyward repertoire. It was their sound and aesthetic fury (like that which Dilsey most surely suppressed) that shook the archive that two men were building brick-by-brick in that pivotal year of 1924.¹⁴

She first appears as detritus in the literary landscape that DuBose Heyward dreamed up for her as he wrote his debut novel in a feverish rush, deep into that summer of 1924.

Through the early night a woman had lain in the dust against the outer wall of Maria’s cook-shop. She was extremely drunk and unpleasant to look upon. Exactly when she had dropped or been dropped there, no one knew. Porgy had not seen her when he had driven in [in his “goat cart”] at sunset. But he had heard some talk of her among those who had entered later. One of the men had come in laughing.

“I seen Crown’s Bess outside,” he said. “Must be she come aroun’ tuh look fur um . . .”¹⁵

Casual racial misogyny is endogenous to Heyward’s homegrown literary aesthetics. It shapes his strategy of characterization, operates as the engine of his plot, and fuels the suspense framing his narrative involving a junky “strumpet” (as some critics would refer to her) and the ill-fated love triangle in which she finds herself, bound on the one hand to Crown, a “brute” “monstrosity” of menacing Black manhood, and on the other to the so-called “crippled beggar” Porgy. The latter was a figure for whom Heyward and his wife Dorothy took equal pride in citing as having been inspired by disabled local African American Charleston resident Samuel Smalls (whose family would for decades seek from the Heywards – unsuccessfully, I might add – financial compensation for the use and distortion of Smalls’s image). As is the case in the stage versions that would follow, the fleeting rehabilitation of Bess as a result of her intimacy with Porgy, the moral economy of the grace he bestows on her shifts the affective mood of the text from graphic sociological tragedy to dime-story romance. The woman who was once “gaunt” is “rounded out, “bringing back a look of youthful comeliness . . . her face,” we are told, “was losing its hunted expression.”¹⁶

Heyward, the grandson of Charleston planter-class parents whose familial vicissitudes hit rock-bottom following the “War of Northern Aggression,” would claim throughout the course of his literary career that the financial precarity framing his postbellum childhood combined with his own community’s regional proximity to vibrant and populous Black life in Charleston – Gullah life that he and his mother Janie had watched with intent and great interest – thereby instilled in him a supposed local color authority and credibility to invent and narrativize the fictional “Catfish Row,” the setting for *Porgy and Bess* and a place that he and the city’s increasingly booming tourist industry would unite in claiming was based on an actual neighborhood: what became known as “Cabbage Row.”¹⁷

As historian Ellen Noonan makes clear in her marvelous and exhaustive study of Charleston, *Porgy and Bess*, and long civil rights history, by 1922, the location that was Cabbage Row “had been ‘vacant for some time,’” due, in part, “to a petition,” she speculates, that had been “brought to the Charleston City Council” that year “by indignant neighbors . . . who demanded the immediate eviction of all of the Af-

rican American tenants there.” White Charlestonians claimed that Cabbage Row’s inhabitants were, according to Noonan’s account of the petition, “involved in a range of illegal and unsavory activities, ‘including the prostitution of black women to white sailors and civilians, knife and gun fights, deplorable sanitary conditions, and the continual usage of ‘the most vile, filthy, and offensive language.’”¹⁸

It was a site that would become the grist for Heyward’s runaway literary ambitions first nurtured in the Poetry Society of South Carolina, which he cofounded in 1920 with Ohio transplant and obsessive low-country Gullah culture amateur ethnographer John Bennett. That group staked its identity on contrasting itself with other all-white literary enclaves in the South who were galvanized to respond to H. L. Mencken’s infamous 1917 throw-the-gauntlet-down excoriation of Southern artistic life (in his essay “The Sahara of the Bozart”), and who “embraced a nostalgia for a time long gone,” as Heyward biographer James Hutchisson points out in his study of the author.¹⁹

Unlike, for instance, the New Orleanian group whose members included so-called adopted Creoles like “Faulkner, Dos Passos, William Spratling, and Roark Bradford,” who wholly embraced the postwar modernist experimental winds blowing their way as the 1920s unfolded, the Charlestonians pushed back on Mencken’s criticisms of the South as “a vast plain of [aesthetic] mediocrity, stupidity, and lethargy.”²⁰ They doubled-down on an inward-looking preservation of local lore as well as what was in their minds an emphasis on the “artistic mission” of “representing southern black life,” as Hutchisson refers to it. Many of the group’s members were white women, painters and poets who gravitated to Gullah tales and portraiture that they cultivated and shared among themselves. Such rituals would have been very much familiar to Heyward, who grew up admiring the started-from-the-bottom-now-we’re-here successes of mother Janie DuBose Heyward, a widow who kept the household afloat by turning herself into an in-demand, local, “darky recitalist” and author of several blackface song and sketchbooks in the 1910s and 1920s.²¹

Note that Junior Heyward shared with his mother and the majority of his fellow white Charleston brethren a deep and abiding resentment toward Black social and cultural autonomy and self-making masked as a familiar desire for “simpler times.” Like his Mama, as Noonan reveals, “Heyward’s authentic South was unhurried, earthy, and perfectly symbolized by its resilient and forgiving black workers. His poetic antimodernism,” she argues, “had a nonfiction counterpart in the [1930] manifesto, *I’ll Take My Stand*, a collection of essays” featuring Southern writers “who dubbed themselves ‘Agrarians’” and “argued that industrial development fostered a culture of consumption that undermined small-town, rural southern values.”²²

Somewhere in that place between a celebrity minstrel mom and the busy literary conceits of a group dually invested in an unreconstructed South and the pres-

ervation of their own parasitic ideas about local “blackness,” Heyward was developing a style of writing that trafficked in the white writer racial dialect craze that would flourish particularly between 1922 and 1927 on the transatlantic scene. And while his brand of literary primitivism does not garner substantial attention from critics the way say a Stein, a Pound, or an Eliot does – for any number of reasons but largely as a result of what Heyward’s poetry and prose lack in terms of originality and invention (called “florid” by more than a few scholars, DuBose Heyward’s poems and fiction were cringe-worthy for reasons that went well beyond its racial macro- and microaggressions) – my interest in his work lies at the level of what we might think of as his adaptive technique and aesthetic translation skills that seem to run parallel to Gershwin’s creative energies and impulses during what would turn out to be the same period of time.²³

As Heyward would gradually distance himself from Bennett’s leadership in the Poetry Society, as he would look to seize upon “the prospect of artistic liberation and a plumbing of his social conscience with the unfettered spirit he had glimpsed among the Gullahs,” as he would “grow,” as he put it, “to see the primitive Negro as neither a professional comedian, nor an object for sentimental charity, but a racially self-conscious human being, living out his destiny beside us, and guided by a code,” he set to writing a novel that could, in part, follow the path set by his mother, a racial ventriloquist and racial fetishist who gravitated to mimicking and reifying the sounds of “black womanhood,” first in print and then perhaps on record (there is indication in the archive that she may have attempted to take her act to the Victor label).²⁴ From Janie Heyward’s nameless Sea Island seafood peddlers (to which she composed odes in her pamphlets), then, to the mythical drug addicted heroine at the center of her son’s lifelong lucrative artistic passion project, the figure of “black womanhood” emerges as adaptive grist, the ghost in the machine of what would ultimately become a particular white modernist turn toward innovations in sound and performance.²⁵

And crucial to that turn, the one that Heyward and the Gershwins would eventually make once they set to working together in earnest on *Porgy and Bess* in the fall of 1933, was a fascination with aestheticizing their perceived notions of the “vice of Black womanhood”: the thief, the sex worker, the jook joint brawler, the women who turned to survival by way of an “informal economy” (as Cynthia Blair and LaShawn Harris and other wonderful Black feminist historians have put it) and who, in turn, were subject to the “juridical production of black female deviance [which] meant that,” as Sarah Haley has powerfully shown, Black “women were arrested more often, and were forced to endure protracted periods of captivity” in the early twentieth-century makings of the carceral state.²⁶

The figure of the “too-too” girls, as Griffin has called them, women of excess who elude and reject social mores and who were (and are) acutely vulnerable to surveillance and subjection, the women of which there is both too much and too

little of them in the archive, as Hartman and others have shown, was the figure on which to capitalize, to mine the depths of old school naturalist tragedy crossed with the thrill of syncopation and the sheer immensity of Black sound's cultural heterogeneity, the constitutive power of a sound that encapsulates the spectrum of modern musicking – from spirituals to the blues, from ragtime to jazz.

It makes sense, then, to read Heyward's circling around the mythical vice of Black womanhood in his first iteration of *Porgy* as a novel as a continuity with his mother's blackface womanhood and yet also a pivotal departure from her plantation hangover scenarios. Here he continuously lingers on the idea of Bess's criminal precarity.

In this first narrative versioning of her, she is the woman who will go from "dust" to dawn in the arms of a lover living his own fragile existence in the imagined Gullah neighborhood of "Catfish Row," only to "fall" again: into jail for a time sharing "a steel cage" with other women that "resembled a large dog-pound," where a "peculiarly offensive moisture clung to the ceiling." Here the narrator's pontificating is especially pronounced when stating that "when all was said and done, what must one expect if one added to the handicap of a dark skin the indiscretion of swallowing cocaine and indulging in a crap game."²⁷

Though carceral Bess makes no further appearances in either the play or the opera that would follow, we might consider the ways that Heyward is here setting in motion a translation of the performative colonization of Black womanhood from one medium (white supremacist "dialect recital" live act) he'd grown up observing to another (a literary rendering of a white supremacist racial romance-tragedy as his first novel). Just as well, he was likely looking askance at someone like the racially liminal Jean Toomer, who, extraordinary as it may seem, had been a "non-resident member" of the Poetry Society of South Carolina in 1923 on the eve of the publication of his masterpiece *Cane*.²⁸ The subsequent "exposure" of Toomer's Blackness led to the threat of his expulsion from the group (a decision against which Heyward apparently vehemently fought) but the more fascinating point to probe is the extent to which *Cane* would have served as a rich model for Heyward to mine the figure of the melancholic Black woman: the "Karinthas" and "Ferns," the ones whose "skin like dusk" you can barely see ("oh can't you see it") as the "sun goes down," the ones whose "eyes said to [men]" that "they were easy."²⁹

Heyward, like his mother, like Gershwin, turns to Black womanhood and turns, in a moment of creative emergence in his career, to literary Black womanhood, illicit and socially dangerous, just as Toomer was breaking through, and just as Bessie (Smith) was breaking out with her first single from Columbia Records. Such a cultural context, it would seem, has much to do with the "Bess" anatomy, as she would continue to transition from literary archetype to operatic and musical theater Black dame noire, doomed to utter tragedy. Caught in the crucible between Black rural angst and urban blight, she is a figure who absorbs and man-

ifests Heyward’s multiple fantasies and aspirations, his proximity to and ersatz renderings of Toomer’s oblique visions of languid and aching Black women in the early 1920s South and the sensual declarations of empress musicians finally getting their sounds down on and for the record for the first time.³⁰

The crude cartography of Heyward’s heroine is the summation of all these influences. Her character’s fatalistic plotting yields its own crescendos, a series of “falls” in the narrative that extend to the point of violation at the hands of Crown (scripted in the novel ambiguously somewhere between rape and utter sexual surrender), to her ultimate recidivism turning back to narcotics and finally fleeing for the big city with her pimp in the play and the opera. Most critics don’t even bother to comment on the fact that, in the novel, she is “carried away on de ribber boat” after having drunk herself into a stupor with “a dozen of de mens gang” at the close of the narrative.³¹ But make no mistake, while his narrative either sells her down the river or lets her loose into the “wild” of the city, DuBose Heyward needs his Bess. He needs this figure as something more than leitmotif, as in fact a catalyst for the kind of dramatic experimentation that would drive his shared operatic ambition with Gershwin.

If, as Linda Hutcheon makes clear in her germinal study of this subject, that “adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication,” Heyward and Gershwin set their sights on repeating an idea about Blackness and womanhood and vice in another form without purely replicating it.³²

On an evening in the early summer of 1926, George Gershwin set to reading a copy of Heyward’s bestselling novel, allegedly devouring it in one sitting, and swiftly soon after sending a letter off to the author expressing his desire to explore *Porgy* as a sonic venture, as an opera that he might use as a platform to essentially pursue the “pseudomorphosis,” as comparative literature scholar Brent Edwards has put it, at the heart of Heyward’s narrative. The “process of pseudomorphosis,” he adds, “can be a way to expand boundaries . . . discover new possibilities . . . transform a medium precisely by making it become other.”³³

In their joint adaptation of the text into a “folk opera,” which begins in earnest in 1933, the Gershwins along with Heyward deepened and showcased the angle of the “love triangle” between that aforementioned disabled “beggar,” the “drug addicted strumpet,” and the brute, lascivious lover Crown who struggles to seize back control of Bess as she falls for Porgy and as she contemplates a life free of that “happy dust” supplied by her pusher Sportin’ Life. All this set against the backdrop of the fictional world of rural Black squalor where tight-knit community nonetheless endures. Spectacular tragedy of operatic proportions ensues.

In October 1935, *Porgy and Bess* made its Broadway premiere, running for a “disappointing” (by musical theater rather than opera standards) “124 shows” before closing. But Gershwin’s first and last opera before succumbing to a brain

tumor at the age of thirty-eight was the fullest manifestation of that “jazz thing” he’d been chasing all along. *Porgy and Bess* was a production that bristled with formalistic complexity and cultural cross-pollination. Heyward and the Gershwins rode the dissonant edge of “modern” musicking hard in their work, offering their mannered interpretations of the “blues,” crossed with “spirituals,” crossed with “jazz,” “Tin Pan Alley,” and “classical . . . recitatives . . . canonic techniques . . . the leitmotif.”³⁴

And it was a project that was polarizing from the start. There were the critics, some of whom were unsettled by its “Negro folksiness” all mixed up with classical fugues and arias, others who were undone by vaudeville musical theater and Harlem cabaret-era jazz infusing itself into the “form” of the opera. And that’s just the white folks. Prominent African Americans’ reactions to the show range from the aforementioned Ellington’s write-off to that of sociologist Harold Cruse to Lorraine Hansberry, who was featured in a 1959 *Variety* article entitled “Lorraine Hansberry Deplores *Porgy*.” In 1959, as well, James Baldwin would greet the arrival of the film – which he describes as “lumber[ing]” into theaters all “grandiose, foolish, and heavy with the stale perfume of self-congratulation” – by declaring in trademark fashion that “what has always been missing from George Gershwin’s opera is what the situation of *Porgy and Bess* says about the White world.” Black suffering, “bizarre sexuality,” as *New Yorker* critic Hilton Als refers to it, sonic blackface hokum. This is the racial mountain that we’re asked to climb so often when attending a night at this particular opera.³⁵

Gershwin the composer and Heyward the librettist would work to adapt, to transpose the errant woman of “the slum” from the discursive realm, across the dramatic form cowritten by Heyward and wife Dorothy and a Broadway hit in 1927. They would work to “transcode” this Bess in their bid to “elevate” jazz to the realm of the classical, to adapt a racial and gender figuration and situate it within a fully “sung play” whose structure, as Fisher notes, “incorporates” the genre’s “inherent techniques . . . songs” and “arias, duets and ensembles, sung recitatives that provide action and link its songs . . . leitmotif themes that provide reminiscence, or identify ideas or characters.”³⁶

We might think of this aural, visual, and kinesthetic palimpsest of the 1925 source text as a kind of “remediation” (as Hutcheon would have it) of that *Rhapsody* note, an elongated Barthesian “stereophony of echoes, citations and references” in not just Heyward’s racial repertoire but Gershwin’s as well. The composer’s nearly wholly overlooked 1923 blackface operetta *Blue Monday*, which features a scorned “Black” murderess hell bent on short-circuiting another love triangle³⁷ demonstrates his own persistent interest in the figure of Black female vice as muse.³⁸

By the time Gershwin set out in search of the quasi-ethnographic material he collected on three trips to Charleston in 1933 and 1934, he was ready to push forward with what would seemingly become a kind of odd and unusual cross-poll-

nation of forms of racial mimicry that combined urban racial caricature with that of the mythical “folk.” During this period, Gershwin engaged in a series of expeditions – part Charleston research project, part promotional press junket – with Heyward to Folly Island in the two years leading up to the production’s premiere, heading to “a Negro meeting ... ‘shouting’” along with the worshippers, “catching the beat instinctively and later working it into his music,” according to a 1935 *New York Times* article.³⁹ Such anecdotes showcase the Gershwins’ and Heyward’s active participation in a long tradition of racialized transcription.

No doubt, Heyward and the Gershwins walked a complicated line in the business of notating and transcribing Black vernacular sound, oscillating between notational violence and a fascination with and fetishistic reverence for audible “Blackness” that seemingly resists incorporation (what we might think of as a kind of Derridean archival violence that shelters, preserves, and presents itself as revealing, even as it conceals, histories of subjugation).⁴⁰ Or perhaps even more aptly we might think of this transcriptive endeavor as endemic of the kind of “violence” that Baldwin theorizes as undergirding the fantasy of the *Porgy and Bess* opera itself.

This “cruellest” of fantasies, Baldwin observes, in which “Negroes seem to speak to [white America] of a better life, better in the sense of being more honest, more open, and more free: in a word, more sexual” and are therefore “hideously” “penalized ... for what the general guilty imagination makes of them.” “This fantasy,” he continues, “which is at the bottom of almost all violence against Negroes,” underwrites the entire Gershwin-Heyward project. Yet Gershwin scholars even today still liken this process to acts of “interpreting the music through the filter of his own tastes and experiences.” As does music historian Anna Harwell Celenza, who characterizes this kind of phenomenon as a translation of “feelings” and “impressions,” the kind of which are, in my opinion, as familiar as jumping Jim Crow.⁴¹

But there has to be more to say about this old school love and theft; we can and should put more pressure on examining the relationship between the idioms and aesthetics erupting out of this line of interpretation and the nameless subjects – out in the streets, up the dark hallways, perched on the fire escapes, or maybe even placed on Gershwin’s wall – who were interpolated into a project for which they most certainly never asked to be included. Celenza’s reading of one famous 1934 photograph of Gershwin “sitting at the piano supposedly working on *Porgy and Bess*” hinges on the contention that this “portrait of a young African American girl he painted in the early 1930s ... is not,” she argues, “a photograph depicting the girl as she actually is,” but of “how he envisions her. It shows *his* interpretation of who she is, painted in response to *his* encounter with her.”⁴²

And don’t we know it.

If anything, it is an image of an image that reminds us of the extent to which Gershwin, his brother Ira, and the Heywards – both mother and son – were at the

forefront of a battle over Black women artists' vocality, their sonic ontology, their interpretative radicalism, their aesthetic will to survive. They were crafting, collaborating with one another, some would say colluding with one another in the production of what musician and conceptual artist Mendi Obadike has influentially termed an "acousmatic blackness" particular to Black womanhood: that is, they were developing the sound of the "perceived presence of the black body in a vocal timbre, whether or not that body is determined to be black by other metrics."⁴³ Such moves are as old as the American culture industry, as numerous critics have long reminded us. But the stakes, I would argue, could not have been higher for Black women artists in those early years of blues recordings, when systemic structures had enabled white women like Sophie Tucker and Marion Harris to lay down tracks for the mass market in the 1910s, in the decade before the sisters gained entrance into the studio booth.⁴⁴

If, as the brilliant musicologist Nina Eidsheim insists, we have to think of voice as "co-articulation," if we have to think of vocality and vocal timbre as what she calls a "thick event," a "collective" phenomenon that is informed – at once – by embodied performance and manifestations of networks of listening (singers listening to other singers, critics and historians listening to and recording and characterizing their own culturally dense perceptions of performers), a "chain of associations," Eidsheim argues, "made by an individual under the pressures of the social and cultural contexts in which that individual participates," then we have reached the point of finally paying much closer attention to both the Heywards' as well as the Gershwin's pivotal role in inventing, producing, and branding a deeply influential and lasting "sound of black womanhood" that they delivered to the masses in the era that competed with the 1920s rise of the classic blues queens as well as in the decade after the decline of their popularity.⁴⁵

The sisters were quietly furious about this, even as they made their own sounds.

It is time now, then, to ask: what, if anything, has this grandly imposing hybrid musical text offered Black women artists, and what have these artists done to deform the Gershwin form? Time to ask whether there's another generative method of listening to the way that this production archives interracial encounter in sound and also creates spaces where Black women performers might improvise heroically complex, opaque, and mischievous ways of sounding out their subjectivities. How might we listen against the grain to the Gershwin and Heyward archive that these artists carry with them, translate, redeploy, and revise by way of virtuosic performance strategies? How might we think differently about the politics of cultural appropriation and racial mimicry by way of their work?

A range of Black women artists have taken up the challenge of wrestling with Gershwin and Heyward's invention, performing an aesthetically demanding work, a work in which Black women performers in particular are made to coun-

tenance varying modes of representational violence and dramaturgical labor, a work that simultaneously calls upon them to tap into their most heterogeneous virtuosic abilities (to be able to sing in “wide vocal ranges” and with “great physical stamina” folk, Broadway, opera, and spirituals) while also asking of them simultaneously to re-inscribe the most familiar of Black female caricatures. And it is my contention that these virtuosos in various versions of the show have innovated ways of turning the clashing tension between the sonic form of Bess and the content of her caricature into an experimental genre unto itself. Each of these women crafted vocalities that enabled them to traverse and mediate social spaces and ultimately keep a different time to that of the production’s gauzy, incandescent vision of “Summertime” for its Black rural laborers. In this way, too, these women ultimately strategized ways of scoring the conditions and possibilities of being aesthetically on the edge and “outside” the histo-temporalities and racial geographies set for them, and they passed that secret on to generations of artists who followed the paths that they paved. This is part of the continuing life of the larger “novel” that, for sure, exceeded the boundaries of Heyward’s original plans and dreams.

From the opera icons and musical theater actresses who have inhabited the role of the lead heroine through the years to the myriad performers who have served in supporting roles and the all-important chorus: think of everyone from *The Living Is Easy* novelist Dorothy West who was in the cast of Heyward’s 1927 play to theater veterans Abbey Mitchell and Etta Moten, from opera legends like Leontyne Price to classical upstarts like Clamma Dale in 1976, from ingenues like a young Maya Angelou to midcentury stars like Pearl Bailey and Diahann Carroll, to say nothing of the magnificent and tremendously influential Eva Jessye, who served as the opera’s longtime choral director.⁴⁶ Clearly, the Gershwin production has been a gateway for Black women musical artists who have invoked a range of aesthetic practices to tackle its troubling constructions of Black womanhood, its rendering of a tragic heroine as a sonic adaptation of those “social documents” and data that eviscerate the human, convert them into “statistical persons,” as Hartman reminds, “reduce[s]” them to “human excrescence of social law and the slum.” In Gershwin and Heyward’s “hot hands,” she is not a heroine able to “joy her freedom,” in the words of historian Tera Hunter.⁴⁷

Yet I want to suggest that, even in her original rendering, remaining perched on the edge of the community, the edge of the play, the edge of morality, the perpetual edge of her operatic diva emotions, Bess provides a way for numerous artists to mine fraught performative spaces. There is, of course, a distinction between the state of Bess’s being “outside” versus the state of being “put outdoors,” in Toni Morrisonian terms. “There is a difference,” Morrison writes in a legendary line of *The Bluest Eye*, “in being put *out* and being put *outdoors*. If you are put out, you go somewhere else, if you are outdoors, there is no place to go. The distinction was

subtle but final. Outdoors was the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing our metaphysical condition.”⁴⁸

Both the novel as well as the opera flirt with this kind of haunting precarity as Bess’s presumptive destiny. But in its theatrical iteration, I would suggest that her positionality on the fridge presents itself as something of a fugitive opportunity. There is room, in other words, to consider Bess as *outside* and on the edge of the narrative as holding the potential for her to move in ways unlike the other women on Catfish Row who (save for the capricious Clara who rushes into a hurricane looking for her man) remain resolutely static, committed to the joys of strawberry picking and picnics. Bess is by no means “free,” like the “old women” at the close of Morrison’s novel whose eyes bespeak “a synthesized” “puree of tragedy and humor, wickedness and serenity, truth and fantasy.”⁴⁹

Rather, her edginess and her “rough edges” linger and resonate across Black women’s sonic histories. They evoke her constitutive “resonant meaning” as a character who is listening in the ways that perhaps Jean Luc Nancy had in mind. “To be listening,” Nancy claims, “is always to be on the edge of meaning, or in an edgy meaning of extremity.”⁵⁰

In Gershwin’s epic, Bess listens: to Clara’s opening “Summertime” before singing it herself, to Porgy’s proclamations of love, to Crown’s seductive come-ons (which, in most versions save for the latest, turn lightning fast into sexual coercion), to Sportin’ Life’s call for her to follow him to New York.⁵¹ Tractable throughout the course of the narrative? Perhaps. But in that surfeit of listening, in that absorption of voices singing lullabies, love songs and temptation songs to her, she figuratively (re)arranges a new musical future for the women who (re)cover her and provide her with (performative) cover.

What I am suggesting here is that Bess’s fate is an aesthetic – as well as historical – question mark that has inspired Black women artists to “worry the line,” as Black feminist literary critic Cheryl Wall might put it, and to “worry *her* line” so as to sonically shake it loose from the constrictions of its putative, predetermined outcome.⁵² To worry the line of Bess, then, is to take up the Black feminist literary practice that Wall cites as borrowing from blues idioms, the “changes in stress and pitch, the addition of exclamatory phrases, changes in word order, repetition of phrases within the line itself.” Such a move beckons us to retrace the undertheorized, unheralded performance strategies of artists who transformed the Bess role into avant-garde musicking.

Let us not forget that long and esteemed line of performers – actors, vocalists, and multihyphenate musicians – who worried about Bess and went their own distinct, resourceful, and imaginative ways about worrying her line. From Anne Brown, the Julliard phenom who first tackled the role and brought her to Broadway, on through to that megastorm of modern theater, Audra McDonald. Generation after generation of Black women artists have put the *Porgy and Bess* repertoire

to their own ends, repurposing a text that had, according to Alex Ross, a “score” that “invites considerable freedom of interpretation. Once the chords of ‘Summertime’ start rocking,” he continues,

they become a steady-state environment in which a gifted performer can move around at will. She can bend pitches, add ornaments, shift the line up and down. Billie Holiday and Sidney Bechet made “Summertime” their own; Miles Davis, on his *Porgy and Bess* album of 1958, actually discarded Gershwin’s chords and kept only the melody. The same freedom of expression is permitted in the opera’s other set pieces such as “Bess, You Is My Woman Now,” “My Man’s Gone Now,” and “It Ain’t Necessarily So.”⁵³

It is the form, then, finally – a form originally developed in deep consultation and collaboration with Anne Brown – that begs for fluidity and movement, that beckons its own revisions and refusals, that inspires rigorous, theatrical virtuosic attack in order to burst its protagonist into the realm of polyvalent representational possibility, in order to enable these women to move to a space of their own sonic creation: outside of the fictive pastoral and the present absence of the metropolis and toward an “insistence on potentiality . . . and possibility for another world.”⁵⁴

Think, for instance, of Billie Holiday. With her 1936 version of “Summertime,” *Lady Day*, one year removed from the *Porgy and Bess* premiere, audaciously and artfully streamlines the “Summertime” melody and reminds us that she is, according to Farah Griffin, “the first really modern singer,” with her complex affective gestures, her “careful juxtaposition of notes,” her trademark subtlety, her fearlessness in “running ahead of the band” at times, lagging behind at others. Holiday’s ironic vocals dance with Bunny Berigan’s trumpet and bask in the luxurious thematic dreamscape of the song. It is her sinuous, roving version of Gershwin that (as Farah Griffin reminds me) clears a space for and inspires Miles’s panoramic 1958 rendition two decades later.⁵⁵

Could it be any more fitting that Holiday would record the first pop chart version of this song? Baldwin suggests that there could be no other way since he imagines that “she was much closer to the original” Bess “than anyone who has ever played or sung [the role].” But while his analogy is fueled by the drugs and tragedy nexus that he draws in eulogizing these two figures, my interest in mining the relationship between Holiday and Gershwin pays attention instead to Holiday’s craft as what so many have referred to as “a jazz musician’s vocalist,” one who, when performing “Summertime,” assumes the role of an Albert Murray blues hero, a chance taker, an artist who gambles with and changes up the temporality of the lullaby by way of exploiting the “steady state” open frontier of the song and inserts her own play into the formalistic structure of the tune.⁵⁶

Lady Day and her sister brethren – Mahalia Jackson, Nina Simone, Lena Horne, Pearl Bailey, Sarah Vaughan, to name but only a luminous few, the ones

who would follow her in answering the Bess riddle by carrying her to center of the pop world – are forever busy drawing out the human in this opera-musical repertoire, lighting out across the sonic universe, elegantly critiquing and engaging in prodigious conversations with its malevolent roots while yet still gathering up all those women out on the edge.⁵⁷ Their brave and fiercely intelligent performances in the *Porgy and Bess* archive take us all the way back to the kitchen where jazz is nobody's lady other than her own.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daphne A. Brooks is the William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of African American Studies, American Studies, Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and Music at Yale University. She is the author of *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (2006) and *Jeff Buckley's Grace* (2005). She is currently working on a three-volume study of Black women and popular music culture entitled *Subterranean Blues: Black Women Sound Modernity*. The first volume, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*, is due to be published in 2021.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Ryan Raul Banagale, "The Afterlife of *Rhapsody in Blue*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Gershwin*, ed. Anna Harwell Celenza (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 246.
- ² Richard Crawford, *Summertime: George Gershwin's Life in Music* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), 123.
- ³ Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Farah Jasmine Griffin, "When Malindy Sings: A Meditation on Black Women's Vocality," in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). On white culture workers, jazz, theater, and mass culture, see David Savran, *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theater, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).
- ⁴ On the history of jazz in relation to systemic racism, see Gerald Horne, *Jazz and Justice: Racism and the Political Economy of the Music* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2019).
- ⁵ Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019).
- ⁶ The "lady jazz" phrase appears in multiple iterations across works by white cultural critics and historians of the early jazz era. Erma Taylor cites composer and conductor Walter Damrosch as having "enthused [that] 'Gershwin has made a lady out of jazz'" in reference to *Rhapsody in Blue*. Erma Taylor, "George Gershwin—A Lament" (1937), in *George Gershwin*, ed. Merle Armitage (New York: Longmans Green & Co., 1938), 189. Damrosch famously commissioned *Concerto in F*. See also Henry O. Osgood, *So This Is Jazz* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1926), 204. Lawrence Gilman, "Mr.

George Gershwin Plays His New Jazz Concerto” (1925), in *The George Gershwin Reader*, ed. Robert Wyatt and John Andrew Johnson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 85–87. My great thanks to Brian Kane for engaging in conversations with me about this topic and pointing me in the direction of these works. Kane also reminds that the phrase is “always attributed” to Paul Whiteman “but apparently without citation.” Brian Kane, email to the author, March 4, 2020, emphasis his. He notes that Bañagale cites Whiteman in Ryan Bañagale, *Arranging Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue and the Creation of an American Icon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). Deems Taylor as quoted in Crawford, *Summertime*, 113.

⁷ Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 47. For examples of the “jazz is a woman” trope, see Shane Vogel’s discussion of the 1957 televised broadcast of Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn’s *A Drum Is a Woman*. Shane Vogel, *Stolen Time: Black Fad Performance and the Calypso Craze* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 102–131.

⁸ DuBose Heyward, *Porgy* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2001); DuBose Heyward and Dorothy Heyward, *Porgy* (New York: Players Press, 2006); George Gershwin, *Porgy and Bess: Opera in Three Acts* (New York: Gershwin Publishing Corporation, 1935); and George Gershwin, DuBose and Dorothy Heyward, and Ira Gershwin, *Porgy and Bess: Vocal Score* (New York: Alfred Publishing, 1993).

⁹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage, 2004); *Beloved*, dir. Jonathan Demme (Burbank, Calif.: Touchstone Pictures/Harpo Films, 1998); and Toni Morrison and Richard Danielpour, *Margaret Garner, Opera in Two Acts* (New York: Associated Music Publishers, 2006).

¹⁰ J. Rosamond Johnson as quoted in Joe Nocera, “Variations on an Explosive Theme,” *The New York Times*, January 21, 2012. See also Edward Morrow, “Duke Ellington on Gershwin’s ‘Porgy,’” *New Theatre* (1935): 114–115; and *Porgy and Bess*, dir. Otto Preminger (Culver City, Calif.: Samuel Goldwyn Productions, 1959). Joseph Horowitz notes that Morrow’s own debunking of “Gershwin’s lampblack Negroisms” was widely attributed to Ellington, who subsequently disassociated himself from the article, but not without adding that Gershwin’s music, though “grand,” was “not distinctly or definitely Negroid.” Joseph Horowitz, “Porgy and Bess at the Met,” *The American Scholar*, October 9, 2019, <https://theamericanscholar.org/porgy-and-bess-at-the-met/>.

¹¹ Gwynne Kuhner Brown, “Performers in Catfish Row: Porgy and Bess as Collaboration,” in *Blackness and Opera*, ed. Naomi Andre, Karen M. Bryan, and Eric Saylor (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 179–180.

¹² See, for instance, the all-Black casts of the original 1935 production directed by Rouben Mamoulian, that of the 1942 Broadway revival directed by Cheryl Crawford, the 1952 touring production directed by Robert Breen, and the 1976 Houston Opera production directed by Jack O’Brien. For more on racial politics and the history of the casts, see Ellen Noonan, *The Strange Career of Porgy and Bess: Race, Culture, and America’s Most Famous Opera* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

¹³ George Gershwin, *Porgy and Bess (Opera Study Guide with Libretto)*, ed. Burton Fisher (Boca Raton, Fla.: Opera Journeys Publishing, 2018), 22. My thinking with regard to the concept of the “counter-composer” draws inspiration from Margo Jefferson’s theories of the “counter-diva.” See Margo Jefferson, “The Trolley Song: Cecile McLorin Salvant,” *The New York Times Magazine*, March 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/03/09/magazine/25-songs-that-tell-us-where-music-is-going.html?smid=tw-nytimes&smtype=cur&mtrref=undefined>.

- ¹⁴ On Black women artists as arrangers, curators, and archivists, see Daphne A. Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2021). On theories of arrangement, critical listening, and the role of the arranger, see Peter Szendy, *Listen: A History of Our Ears* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); and Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 27.
- ¹⁵ Heyward, *Porgy*, 47.
- ¹⁶ See Noonan, *The Strange Career of Porgy and Bess*, 105, 250–254; and Heyward, *Porgy*, 66.
- ¹⁷ James M. Hutchisson, *DuBose Heyward: A Charleston Gentleman and the World of Porgy and Bess* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000).
- ¹⁸ Noonan, *The Strange Career of Porgy and Bess*, 128–129.
- ¹⁹ Hutchisson, *DuBose Heyward*, 26. From this critic’s standpoint, Hutchisson’s meditations on race and racial politics in the life and work of Heyward are, at best, antiquated, and, at worst, profoundly problematic and oversimplified at various points in his biographical study of the author.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.
- ²¹ Janie DuBose Heyward sustained a lucrative career as a “dialect recitalist in Charleston, South Carolina, in the 1910s and 1920s. Janie DuBose Heyward, *Songs of the Charleston Darkey* (unidentified publisher, 1912). See my manuscript-in-progress *One of These Mornings: Black Feminist Genius and the Gershwin Problem* (forthcoming) for an extended discussion of Janie DuBose Heyward’s blackface dialect repertoire. For more on Janie Heyward, see Hutchisson, *DuBose Heyward*, 1–19.
- ²² Noonan, *The Strange Career of Porgy and Bess*, 17.
- ²³ See DuBose Heyward, “Gamester’s All,” All Poetry, <https://allpoetry.com/Gamesters-All>. On DuBose Heyward’s poetry career, see Hutchisson, *DuBose Heyward*, 20–48.
- ²⁴ Hutchisson, *DuBose Heyward*, 52, 53. On Janie Heyward’s potential recording career, see Ethan J. Kytte and Blain Roberts, *Denmark Vesey’s Gardens: Slavery and Memory in the Cradle of the Confederacy* (New York: The New Press, 2019), 203. See also “Mrs. Heyward’s Dialect Reading,” *The Charleston Evening Post*, December 4, 1922. My thanks to Ethan Kytte for his assistance with regard to this material.
- ²⁵ Heyward, *Songs of the Charleston Darkey*.
- ²⁶ Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 56; Cynthia Blair, *I’ve Got to Make My Livin’: Black Women’s Sex Work in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); and LaShawn Harris, *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Number Runners: Black Women in New York City’s Underground Economy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016).
- ²⁷ Heyward, *Porgy*, 78, 79.
- ²⁸ Hutchisson, *DuBose Heyward*, 47. Toomer apparently engaged in correspondence with Rex Fuller, Heyward’s successor as the secretary of the Poetry Society, and he also contacted Heyward directly about this. See “Jean Toomer letter to Rex Fuller, February 19, 1923,” in *The Letters of Jean Toomer, 1919–1924*, ed. Mark Whalan (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1926), 131–132. See also Cynthia Earl Kerman and Richard Eldridge, *The Lives of Jean Toomer: A Hunger for Wholeness* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 95. My great thanks to Emily Lutenski for discussions regarding Toomer and Heyward and for bringing these works to my attention.

“A Woman Is a Sometime Thing”

- ²⁹ Hutchisson, *DuBose Heyward*, 47; and Jean Toomer, *Cane* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011).
- ³⁰ On Bessie Smith’s early recording career, see Chris Albertson, *Bessie Smith* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005).
- ³¹ Heyward, *Porgy*, 157.
- ³² Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 7.
- ³³ Brent Hayes Edwards, *Epistrophies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017), 17.
- ³⁴ James Standifer, “The Tumultuous Life of Porgy and Bess,” *HUMANITIES* 18 (6) (1997).
- ³⁵ Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2005), 101–106; “Lorraine Hansberry Deplores ‘Porgy,’” *Variety*, May 27, 1959; and James Baldwin, “On the Horizon: Catfish Row,” in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998). Hilton Als argues that this “show about black people, created entirely by white people, has never been a favorite of black audiences. In traditional stagings, [the characters] Porgy and Bess come together amid their community’s will to destruction; there is no uplift, just sweat, blood carnality, and resignation.” Hilton Als, “A Man and a Woman: ‘Porgy and Bess’ Reimagined,” *The New Yorker*, September 26, 2011.
- ³⁶ Fisher, *Porgy and Bess*, 19.
- ³⁷ This is a work that my grad colleague Allison Chu is now brilliantly interrogating.
- ³⁸ Roland Barthes as quoted in Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 6. See also Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986); Allison Chu with Brian Kane and Daphne Brooks, “Porgy and Bess at 85 and Gershwin Remixed,” Yale University Black Sound and the Archive Working Group Online Public Conversation, October 9, 2020.
- ³⁹ George Gershwin, “Rhapsody in Catfish Row; Mr. Gershwin Tells the Origin and Scheme for His Music in that New Folk Opera Called *Porgy and Bess*,” *The New York Times*, October 20, 1935.
- ⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).
- ⁴¹ Baldwin, “On the Horizon”; Anna Harwell Celenza, “Exploring New Worlds: An American in Paris, Cuban Overture, and *Porgy and Bess*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Gershwin*, ed. Anna Harwell Celenza (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 153–181.
- ⁴² Celenza, “Exploring New Worlds,” 174.
- ⁴³ Mendi Obadike as quoted in Nina Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2019), xi. See also Mendi Obadike, *Low Fidelity: Stereotyped Blackness in the Field of Sound* (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 2005).
- ⁴⁴ For more on the racialized and gender politics of the early recording industry, see my *Liner Notes for the Revolution*.
- ⁴⁵ Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 22–23.
- ⁴⁶ Dorothy West appeared in the premiere production of the drama *Porgy* in 1927. Abbey Mitchell appeared as Clara in the 1935 premiere production of *Porgy and Bess*. Future

- diplomat Etta Moten Barnett appeared as Bess in the 1942 Broadway production. Leontyne Price achieved her breakthrough in the role of Bess in the 1952 touring production and Clamma Dale appeared in the lead role in the Houston Opera high profile 1976 revival. Maya Angelou joined the 1954 cast of the touring production in Italy, and Pearl Bailey and Diahann Carroll appear in the motion picture adaptation.
- ⁴⁷ Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 19; and Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).
- ⁴⁸ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Vintage, 2007), 18.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 159.
- ⁵⁰ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 7.
- ⁵¹ Gershwin, *Porgy and Bess*.
- ⁵² Cheryl Wall, *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).
- ⁵³ For more on Anne Brown, see Kuhner Brown, "Performers in Catfish Row." See also *Gershwin & Bess: A Dialogue with Anne Brown*, dir. Nicole Franklin (Los Angeles: Epiphany Inc., 2010); "Audra McDonald: Shaping Bess on Broadway," *Fresh Air* (NPR), May 15, 2012, <https://www.npr.org/2012/05/15/152693314/audra-mcdonald-shaping-bess-on-broadway>; Alex Ross, *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Picador, 2008), 162; and Miles Davis, *Porgy and Bess* (Columbia Records, 1959, audio recording).
- ⁵⁴ Jose Munoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).
- ⁵⁵ Farah Jasmine Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free, Be A Mystery* (New York: One World Press, 2002); and Billie Holiday, "Summertime" (Sarabandas, 1993, audio recording; first released 1936).
- ⁵⁶ Baldwin, "On the Horizon"; and Albert Murray, *The Hero and the Blues* (New York: Vintage, 1996).
- ⁵⁷ Mahalia Jackson, "Summertime" and "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," *Summertime* (CBS Records, 1956, audio recording). See also "Summertime and I Feel Like a Motherless Child by Mahalia Jackson," YouTube, uploaded September 28, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hohnr22zTxc>; Nina Simone, "Summertime," *Nina Simone at Town Hall* (Colpix, 1959, audio recording); Lena Horne, "Summertime," on Lena Horne and Harry Belafonte, *Porgy and Bess* (RCA, 1959, audio recording); Pearl Bailey, *Porgy and Bess* (Roulette Records, 1958, audio recording); and Sarah Vaughan, *Sarah Vaughan Sings George Gershwin* (EmArcy, 1958, audio recording).