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A New Canon: Dismantling Racist Exclusion in Opera and Paving the Way for Inclusive Representation

Kourtney J. Holmes

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A NEW CANON: DISMANTLING RACIST EXCLUSION IN OPERA AND PAVING THE
WAY FOR INCLUSIVE REPRESENTATION

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ABSTRACT

This document examines the exclusion of African American opera from the traditional Western operatic canon and standard performance practices within educational institutions and professional organizations. The narrow conception of opera as a European art form has obscured the contributions and cultural significance of works by pioneering African American composers. This study addresses this gap and elevates neglected histories by arguing for African American opera's artistic merit and contemporary relevance within the American operatic tradition.

Through musical and historical analysis of representative works from the late 19th/early 20th centuries onwards, I aim to illuminate the genre's unheard tales of struggle, identity, and collective empowerment. Composers like William Grant Still and Harry Lawrence Freeman combined spirituals, African rhythms, and European structures to create a hybrid art form crafted to capture the multifaceted Black experience in America. However, the lack of preservation and distribution and false dichotomies separating "classical" from "folk" music have limited widespread recognition of works that contain insights into marginalization and resilience.

To understand barriers to inclusion, I analyze discriminatory practices and attitudes that have legitimized the marginalization of African American opera within mainstream institutions. Standard audition requirements, curricula, and programming reflect a narrow cultural perspective rather than authentic diversity. My research question centers on how resistant characteristics can be addressed through education, exposure, and adaptations centered on inclusivity.

Adopting a mixed methods approach, I conduct a musicological analysis of select works and examine primary sources from pioneering opera companies juxtaposed with contemporary scholarship on activism, pedagogy, and anti-racist practices. My findings reveal African American opera as integral to understanding identity and empowerment within the arc of Black musical tradition in America.

By shedding light on marginalized perspectives and advocating for the full integration of this undervalued genre, my dissertation calls for transformative change, aiming to dismantle systemic disadvantages within opera. My research recommendations focus on expanding curricula, reevaluating audition expectations, and diversifying performance programming. These measures foster a more inclusive understanding of opera's historical significance and potential within the American musical landscape.

In alignment with this vision, I find resonance in the words of Philip A. Ewell, particularly concerning music theory and its applicability to the realm of opera. Moreover, Ewell highlights the urgency of moving away from undergraduate textbooks solely centered around the music of white composers. His words emphasize the need for a reimagined canon that enriches our cultural understanding and advances the field's responsibility to embrace and celebrate diversity authentically. As Ewell eloquently states, "If we truly 'embraced all approaches and perspectives,' then we would make them—part of [our curricula], from freshman theory to doctoral comprehensive exams, and our undergraduate textbooks would not be based solely on

the music of whites.”¹ This mindset enriches opera's cultural fabric and underscores our collective responsibility to foster authentic diversity within the field.

¹ Philip A. Ewell “Music Theory and the White Racial Frame.” *Music Theory Online*, Society for Music Theory, Sept. 2020, mtosmt.org/issues/mto.20.26.2/mto.20.26.2.ewell.html.

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I want to thank my former teacher, Sandra Moon, for your patience and for giving me a chance to find my voice in a new endeavor. I appreciate your continuous advocacy for me throughout my Master's Degree,

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DEDICATION

I want to dedicate this dissertation and my degree to all my grandparents, both alive and deceased. Thank you for your sacrifices and your survival in this country. This would not have been possible without your bravery and resilience.

Jean Metoyer Smith, Jocelyn Metoyer Lewis, Jonas Holmes

In loving Memory of:

Deborah Lewis, Esther Holmes, Maudra Becknel, William Becknel Sr.

O'neal Manor Smith, Peter Lewis Sr.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements	vi
Dedication.....	viii
List of Tables.....	x
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: Themes in African American Opera.....	12
Chapter 3: Histories of Marginalization.....	24
Chapter 4: Barriers to Wider Inclusion.....	42
Chapter 5: Strategies for Integrating into Standard Repertoire.....	55
Chapter 6: Conclusion.....	61
Appendix.....	64
Bibliography.....	89
Curriculum Vitae.....	91

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Opera America Reformation.....	59
Table 2: African American Opera Conferences.....	60
Table 3: Productions of African American Operas since 2023 via OperaBase (By Date).....	64
Table 4: Soprano arias from African American Operas.....	65
Table 5: Mezzo-soprano/contralto arias from African American Operas.....	66
Table 6: Tenor arias from African American Operas.....	67
Table 7: Bass/baritone arias from African American Operas.....	68
Table 8: Late 20th Century-21st Century Black Operas.....	69
Table 9: Duets and Scenes from African American Operas.....	87

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Since the founding of the nation's first opera company in 1885, the American operatic tradition has focused on the works and heritage of Europe.² This classical canon has overshadowed the profound contributions of African American composers and performers who developed their idioms and styles. African American opera holds fundamental importance to American identity and history. It provides a lens into Black Americans' long-suppressed experiences and contributions, a demographic integral to this nation's cultural and economic fabric since its colonial beginnings. Through dramatic storytelling and musical traditions like spirituals, blues, and jazz, African American opera gives voice to the emotions, struggles, and aspirations that have defined the Black-American experience over centuries of slavery, segregation, racism, and civil rights movements.

For this discussion, I define "African American opera" as a sub-genre that centers explicitly on the experiences, stories, and artistic contributions of African American composers, librettists, singers, and performers. It encompasses operatic works exploring African American cultural heritage, history, and social issues. Although I reference examples of acclaimed and well-received works by non-black composers/librettists, I choose to center the importance of works of African American/Black-American composers while also discussing the limited quantity of these earlier works, the resurgence of some others and the refreshing new compositions of today. Further

² Jeannette Meyers Thurber (1840-1946) founded the American Opera company in New York along with the National Conservatory of Music; the latter is famous as the meeting place of composers Antonin Dvořák and Harry T. Burleigh. Michael Cooper, "The Deal that brought Dvořák to New York." *The New York Times*, August 23, 2013."

discussions and research need to be conducted to include non-American composers and librettists within the African diaspora.

Instead of getting entangled in ceaseless debates over the notion of "trauma porn," African American opera offers a raw and unfiltered portrayal of truth. It reveals that resilience and hope have emerged from the depths of immense suffering and injustices. This genre incorporates genuine Black cultural practices, such as call-and-response and improvisation, which have enriched American music globally and served as a powerful challenge to dominant Eurocentric narratives. By doing so, African American opera confronts the marginalization and exclusion of Black³ histories and accomplishments in shaping national identity.

African American opera also promotes greater diversity and inclusion. It creates opportunities for Black artists to excel professionally while dismantling stereotypes of opera as an exclusively white European art form. In these ways, African American opera makes invaluable contributions to American heritage and has profoundly influenced genres from jazz to gospel, establishing a distinctive American sound that celebrates multiculturalism. Ultimately, Black opera holds significance as an artistic expression and an act of reclamation—affirming the rightful place of Black creativity, resistance, and triumphs in the national story.

1.1 A Brief History

³ Please note that when I use the term "Black" throughout this text, it is important to understand that I am specifically referring to individuals who identify as Americans and are part of the African diaspora. This distinction is vital in recognizing the diverse range of peoples and cultures encompassed within the Black community in America. I do include a few prominent black non-American composers in the 20th/21st Century table in the Appendix for visibility and programming.

African American opera has flourished for over a century, tracing its roots to the late 19th century. One of the earliest known works was Thomas Douglass's *Virginia's Ball* in 1868, though this score is unfortunately lost to history. A pioneering figure was Harry Lawrence Freeman, who in 1891 composed *Epthalia* - the first African American opera to achieve a successful production. That same year, Freeman founded the Freeman Opera Company in Denver, Colorado. His second opera, *Martyr*, gained performances in major cities like Chicago and Cleveland, distinguishing Freeman's company as the first in America led entirely by Black artists.

The early 20th century saw composers like Scott Joplin, who composed three stage works. *Tremonisha* (1911) was his most well-known work, although it could not be produced in his lifetime due to financial woes. Joplin was a catalyst that inspired many composers to utilize Black Americans' musical idioms, and with that, a wave of black fine arts soon followed. The Harlem Renaissance considered an intellectual revival of African American literature, art, music, dance, and theater, was invaluable to developing African American operatic repertoire. Many writers and poets inspired the musicians of this era and even those after, producing the foundations of the stories that would soon be set to music and the texts and libretti of many staged works.

Despite these seminal early efforts, it was the National Negro Opera Company (NNOC), founded in 1941 by Mary Cardwell Dawson, that indeed established the first prominent African American opera organization in the US. Where previous troupes were often short-lived, the NNOC evolved from a training program into a multi-city enterprise with active chapters spread across Washington, D.C., Chicago, and Cleveland. This broadened reach allowed for unprecedented popularity and longevity that elevated

Black opera onto the national stage. Under Dawson's visionary leadership, the NNOC cultivated young Black talent while creating opportunities for full productions that brought African American compositions and musical traditions to wider audiences than ever before.

The pioneering works of figures like Freeman and the groundbreaking initiatives of the NNOC laid the necessary groundwork for African American opera to take root and blossom and for new creative voices to emerge. Their contributions helped assert the legitimacy of Black artistic expression through this operatic medium and push toward more inclusive representation in America's cultural landscape. The rich history thus far discussed outlines opera's significance to the African American experience while setting the stage for further examination of its marginalization from mainstream canon/practice.

1.2 Marginalization

Despite its long and notable history, African American opera has endured marginalization within the mainstream opera world. Factors of discrimination and exclusion significantly limited the representation and recognition of this culturally significant art form. During the era of Jim Crow segregation, few mainstream opera companies welcomed Black artists, necessitating the emergence of their own troupes and institutions to nurture and showcase Black talent.

An additional barrier was the dominance afforded to European classical music and opera, which occupied pride of place within American culture for decades. African American traditions were often dismissed as inferior, so more opportunity was needed for these unique musical perspectives to gain prominence. The tendency of Black

composers and librettists to center themes reflecting their communal experiences also met resistance, judged as less universal than Eurocentric narratives.

Still, through the 20th century, pioneering individuals like Marian Anderson, known for being the first African American singer to perform at the Metropolitan Opera, blazed new trails, ascending to international stardom despite immense obstacles. It was the Met's 1955 production of *Un Ballo in Maschera* that symbolically desegregated opera. Singers like Lillian Evanti, Florence Cole Talbert, and Caterina Jaboro achieved limited European operatic careers by singing lead roles in Italy, France, and Belgium. In the U.S., the experimental New York City Opera (NYCO), founded in 1943, opened its doors and promoted the talent of young African American singers and composers during this time.

In the subsequent generations, luminous singers like Leontyne Price emerged, successfully carving out illustrious careers on both domestic and international stages. Throughout the 1980s, there was an even further shift forward, with many talented black singers having substantial careers. These singers' success helped elevate respect for Black opera and open doors for subsequent generations of artists. Esteemed singers like Martina Arroyo, Shirley Verrett, Grace Bumbry, Leona Mitchell, Florence Quivar, Kathleen Battle, Jesse Norman, Barbara Hendricks, Hilda Harris, and Harolyn Blackwell steadily expanded recognition of African American opera's quality and importance on broader stages.⁴ Companies moved to incorporate more works by African American composers in the 1970s-80s, such as Anthony Davis' influential opera

⁴ Naomi André. "Black Opera." *Black Opera*, Seattle Opera Blog, www.seattleoperablog.com/2022/02/black-opera.html. Accessed 5 Apr. 2024.

X, The Life and Times of Malcolm X — a dramatization of the Civil Rights icon's personal transformation.

The 1990s-2000s saw further blossoming with dedicated troupes and organizations like Opera Ebony, Harlem Opera Theater, Opera Créole, the Black Opera Research Network, and Black Opera Alliance emerging to showcase Black talent. Today's leading lights like Terence Blanchard continue innovating the genre through commissions from major houses like the Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, the Lyric Opera of Chicago, and even the Mecca of North American Opera, the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City.

While gaps persist in documenting African American opera's complete achievements, it remains clear this enduring art form has profoundly enriched American culture despite systems of marginalization stemming from inequities in society at large. Future efforts must illuminate its ongoing value as a cultural treasure celebrating the African American experience.

1.3 Unheard Voices and the Harmful Consequences of Exclusion in Opera and Classical Music

Amplifying marginalized voices is critical to fully understanding any artistic tradition, as narrow perspectives often fail to capture fields' true complexity. This holds particularly true in opera and classical music, where entrenched exclusion systems have long prevented unheard narratives from being rightfully acknowledged. Recognizing marginalized communities' inherent contributions may create a more equitable vision of music's timeline and traditions. Progress can only be made “by hearing a range of voices,” it is essential to understand the “depth, breadth, and

complexity of any art form.”⁵ In the context of African American opera, this amplification becomes particularly significant.

African American opera is a prime example of how omitting perspectives distorts history. Despite flourishing for over a century, these works have faced continuous marginalization from mainstream recognition. Their exclusions from "legitimate" categories perpetuate the false dichotomy between classical and folk traditions. This dichotomy, constructed through subjective value judgments, minimizes African American compositions' cultural significance and universal appeal. By overlooking such profound contributions, the field has denied itself a richer understanding of American identity's inherent diversity.

Acknowledging suppressed viewpoints not only enriches comprehension but also begins dismantling injustices. For too long, the narratives privileged within prevailing canons painted an incomplete portrait contradicting lived realities. Uncovering African American stories illuminates operatic traditions never captured by Eurocentric confines alone. Through these works, alternative histories shed light on the complexity of American history and identity, challenging the dominance of singular perspectives that marginalize so many. Broadening examinations to incorporate diverse chronicles cultivates more representative conceptions of cultural heritage.

Magnifying the stories and experiences of underprivileged and underrepresented communities stands as a fundamental pillar of Critical Race Theory, notably encapsulated in the concept of Counter-storytelling. This transformative tool serves to analyze, expose, and challenge the narratives of racial privilege that are predominantly

⁵ Naomi André. *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement*. University of Illinois Press, 2018.

crafted by the "majoritarian" perspective, which in our context refers to white-American and Western European stories. Counter-stories not only aim to combat dominant narratives but also emanate from the creativity and merit of marginalized communities. It is crucial to steer clear of an aggressive approach to creation solely to challenge the status quo because "by responding only to the standard story, we let it dominate this discourse,"⁶ highlighting the need to go beyond the dominant narratives. It is essential to recognize that this concept is inherent within African American, Chicana(o), and Native American communities as "oppressed groups have known instinctively that stories are an essential tool to their own survival and liberation."⁷ These stories take various forms, including personal narratives that recount individual experiences, third-person narratives that share the stories of others, and composite stories that draw from diverse experiences. African American opera serves as a compelling medium to address Critical Race Theory, as it abounds with these counter-narratives that are valid and significant in pursuing social justice and racial equality.

Inclusivity within the realms of opera and classical music demands scrutiny of power dynamics that perpetuate inequities. As scholarly discourse underscores, the persistent exclusion prevalent in these domains serves to uphold systems of power and privilege, resulting in the denial of access and opportunities for marginalized communities. It is important to remember that "the struggle for cultural representation is

⁶ Adrien Katherine Wing, et al. *Critical Race Feminism: A Reader*. New York University Press, 2003.

⁷ Daniel G. Solórzano, and Tara J. Yosso. *Critical Race Methodology*, San Jose State University, www.sjsu.edu/people/marcos.pizarro/courses/8085/s1/SY.pdf. Accessed 4 Apr. 2024.

inseparable from the struggle for social justice.”⁸ Thus, to forge a genuinely democratic future, it becomes imperative to scrutinize and challenge the systemic obstacles that impede progress while actively promoting opportunities across diverse communities. By amplifying suppressed narratives and addressing the damaging impacts of exclusion, these artistic spheres can unlock their full potential for cultural enrichment.

1.4 Advocating for Policy and Practice Changes to Remedy Injustice

Addressing opera and classical music's exclusionary legacies demands proactive measures to remedy systemic inequities. Scholars widely assert that critical reevaluations of current practices coupled with innovative, inclusive strategies can effectively enact change. Educational institutions play a formative role in shaping understandings and must diversify curricula.

Traditional Eurocentric dominance of curricula fails to illuminate America's full musical inheritance. Courses should incorporate works from marginalized communities to expand conceptions of artistic excellence beyond select standards. Introducing underrecognized compositions challenges normalized canons and nurtures comprehension of musicking's diverse traditions. Audition protocols similarly require reimagining to appraise artistry across traditions authentically.

Performance programming must also restore missing narratives through intentional, representative works. Featuring underprogrammed compositions reconstructs accepted hierarchies, sharing hidden riches with the broader public. Beyond isolated modifications, advocacy dismantles systemic inequities through multi-

⁸ Angela Y. Davis. *The Meaning of Freedom: And Other Difficult Dialogues*. City Lights Publishers, 2012.

faceted reform. Access disparities persist through admissions criteria, which privilege specific styles above all. Funding streams regularly benefit entrenched trajectories rather than innovators.

Community outreach cultivates diverse interests while facilitating cross-cultural interchange and dispels prejudices. Revising discriminatory conditions constructs equitable environments where all may see themselves recognized. Coordinating policy and practice transforms an industry's culture. Token acknowledgments of diversity merely pay lip service, whereas substantive overhaul acknowledges humanity's composite character. Music uplifts through varied communities' enriching perspectives united in a common purpose. Silenced contributions may now resonate through advocacy's insistence their experiences fundamentally shape defining traditions. Rectifying erasures ultimately benefits all.

1.5 Conclusion

This chapter examines the sociohistorical contexts that have informed exclusionary norms in opera and classical music, limiting representative diversity. Analyzing the formation of canonic standards and prevailing conventions illuminated intrinsic constraints outlining equitable practices. Reimagining significance demands challenging normalized narratives that naturalize oppression through selective acknowledgment of humanity's shared cultural inheritance.

Rectifying such imbalances requires reconstructing educational curricula, audition protocols, and programming initiatives to address restrictive paradigms. Broadening pedagogical exposure cultivates holistic comprehension while incorporating diverse repertoires disrupts hierarchical rankings predicated on Eurocentric aesthetics.

Authentically appraising artistic complexity demands evaluating works outside dominant stylistic conventions. Targeted community outreach fosters interest across demographics, while cross-cultural exchange dismantles prejudices.

Crafting multifaceted arguments in support of transformational reform disrupts the complacent preservation of disadvantageous conditions. We must substantively overhaul discriminatory structures through coordinated revision of institutional policies and practices, acknowledging our collective stake in music's capacity to uplift. Rectifying historical erasures restores missing narratives, enabling once-silenced artistic expressions to resonate freely. Industry collaboration realizes settings wherein all may appreciate treasured works reflecting society's true richness and diversity.

Progress requires sustained advocacy and collaboration between academics, arts professionals, and the public. While this document illuminates exclusionary legacies and the imperative for change, responsibilities to ensure equitable, representative environments remain. Only through a shared dedication to these ideals may opera and classical music achieve its highest social purposes.

CHAPTER 2: THEMES IN AFRICAN AMERICAN OPERA

African American opera, a distinct and vibrant genre within the broader realm of classical music, encompasses a rich tapestry of narratives, musical styles, and cultural expression that profoundly shape our understanding of recurring themes within this significant genre. Rooted in the experiences and traditions of the African diaspora, African American opera offers a unique lens through which we can explore recurring themes that resonate deeply within the community and beyond. This chapter identifies and discusses these recurring themes, highlighting their significance, cultural context, and artistic contributions. By delving into these themes, we gain a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances present in African American opera and recognize its profound impact on the broader operatic tradition.

One recurring theme addresses struggles for freedom and equality. Often depicted through operas narrating pivotal figures' journeys, this theme highlights liberty's essentiality. Works like Nkeiru Okoye's *Harriet Tubman* and Dorothy Rudd Moore's *Frederick Douglass* illuminate subjects' triumphs amid slavery and discrimination's adverse impacts. These operas recognize marginalized populations' resilience while challenging subjugation by portraying hardship and courage.

Another pervasive theme emerges through cultural celebration. Incorporating African diasporic musical styles, these operas showcase inherited traditions that uniquely shape identity. By amplifying underrepresented narratives, operas provide inclusive platforms that affirm shared humanity. Cultural exaltation confronts Eurocentric dominance that naturalizes selective acclaim and nurtures comprehensive cultural cognizance.

Issues of identity, community, and justice are likewise prominently featured. Addressing topics like police brutality and racism, operas function as discourse forums to unpack hindrances confronting African Americans. Characters encountering intersectional prejudices probe the complexity of a sense of belonging amid inequitable contexts. These works shed light on lived realities while advocating transformative reform, recognizing all peoples' shared stake in equitable, inclusive reconstruction.

Analyzing these prominent themes further illuminates African American opera's artistic depth and cultural profundity. By interpreting recurring topics through specific works, a deeper comprehension of this genre's profound societal resonance emerges, acknowledging its integral role in reshaping operatic traditions to celebrate shared humanity authentically.

2.1 Identity and Self-Discovery

Identity is a prominent theme in African American opera, encompassing the exploration of self-definition and the reconciliation of personal identity with the broader cultural and social context. Characters within these operas often grapple with profound questions, such as the meaning of African American identity and reconciling their identity with their community's historical and cultural legacy. Self-discovery is another prevalent theme in African American opera, as characters journey to understand themselves and their place in the world. This process entails introspection, reflection, and revealing their strengths, weaknesses, and desires.

Margaret Garner by Richard Danielpour, with libretto by the remarkable Toni Morrison, was co-commissioned by Michigan Opera Theatre, Cincinnati Opera, and Opera Philadelphia and premiered in 2005. It follows the unfortunate life of a woman,

Margaret Garner, who is enslaved on the Maplewood Plantation in Kentucky. Although married, Margaret Garner unwillingly grasps the attention of her widowed master, Edward Gaines, who only sees her as a sexual object. His daughter Caroline sees Margaret's humanity and views her more as a mother figure. As a mother herself, Margaret struggles with the reality of raising her children in the institution of slavery. She and her husband decide to attempt to escape to freedom in Ohio but are hunted down. Before being re-captured, she drowns both of her children to prevent them from ever living another day enslaved. She is tried for "destruction of property" and sentenced to death. "However, Gaines appears with a letter of commutation from the governor, aiming to spare Margaret's life and win back his good graces with his daughter. But Margaret, refusing to be re-enslaved, dies by suicide when she steps off the gallows on her own volition."⁹

Throughout the opera, Margaret Garner struggles to reconcile her identity as a woman, a mother, and a wife within the construct of slavery. In Act I, Scene 3, she sings a breathtakingly beautiful aria about her "understanding of herself as a person to be loved."¹⁰ At a time when she and her family were legally considered property, she is seen fighting for her humanity by deeply reflecting on the meaning of love and the love she has to share with those around her. This is powerfully expressed through Morrison's text, as seen in Figure 1.

⁹ Amardeep Singh. "Toni Morrison: 'Margaret Garner' (2005): Overview and Links." *Toni Morrison: A Teaching and Learning Resource Collection*, Toni Morrison: A Teaching and Learning Resource Collection, scalar.lehigh.edu/toni-morrison/margaret-garner-2005-overview-and-links. Accessed 4 Apr. 2024.

¹⁰ Richard Danielpour. "Richard Danielpour: Triptych (2006)." *Wise Music Classical*, www.wisemusicclassical.com/composer/321/Richard-Danielpour/. Accessed 4 Apr. 2024.

Figure 1: A Quality Love by Richard Danielpour from *Margaret Garner*

Are there many kinds of love?

Show me each and every one.

You can't, can you?

For there is just one kind.

Only unharnessed hearts can survive a locked-down life.

Like a river rushing from the grip of its banks,

As light escapes the coldest star;

A quality love—the love of all loves—will break away.

When sorrow clouds the mind, the spine grows strong;

No pretty words can soothe or cure what heavy hands can break.

When sorrow is deep,

the secret soul keeps its weapon of choice: the love of all loves.

No pretty words can ease or cure what heavy hands can do.

When sorrow is deep, the secret soul keeps its quality love.

When sorrow is deep,

The secret soul keeps

Its weapon of choice: the love of all loves!¹¹

African American opera frequently draws upon the rich tapestry of African American cultural heritage, showcasing elements such as music, dance, and other artistic traditions. By doing so, these operas celebrate and preserve African American culture and delve into additional themes of identity and self-discovery.

¹¹ Toni Morrison. *Margaret Garner*, classics.domains.skidmore.edu/lit-campus-only/primary/texts/Margaret%20Garner%20libretto.pdf. Accessed 5 Apr. 2024.

In recent seasons, there has been an increase in performances of the opera *Treemonisha*. Notably, a reimagined production by Damien Sneed was presented at Opera Theater St. Louis, and a forthcoming new production directed by Claire Manjarrès is scheduled to debut at Opéra National de Bordeaux in May 2024. These notable productions signify a growing recognition and appreciation for the significance of *Treemonisha* within the opera world. Written in 1911 by Scott Joplin, it is sometimes referred to as a “ragtime” opera, though Joplin never referred to it as such himself. Unfortunately, he wouldn’t see it fully staged in his lifetime, as the first complete performance wasn’t until 1972. This story follows a community of African Americans at the end of the 19th century who wish to assimilate into mainstream American society but who gravitate towards the superstitions of the old African ways. Treemonisha, a literate young woman, is kidnapped by “conjure men” but soon rescued by her friend Remus, and the two embark on a journey home with the help of some workers on a nearby plantation. Upon her arrival, she is elected leader of her community. The superstitions of the conjure men are a direct juxtaposition to Treemonisha’s own sentiments of logic and education. “The theme of the work--the importance of an education for both men and women--is powerfully set against music that borrows all of the elements of European opera and merges them with the unique rhythms of ragtime.”¹² Although *Treemonisha* follows the European operatic tradition of having an extended overture, a prelude, arias, and a finale scene, the opera includes lively ensemble numbers like “We’re Goin’ Round” and “Aunt Dinah has Blowed de Horn,”

¹² Treemonisha. Web.. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200035812/>.

both of which are written in a “ragtime” style and include some variation of choreography appropriate for the era.

The historical context serves as a compelling backdrop in many African American operas, with specific settings ranging from the era of slavery to the Civil Rights Movement and the contemporary era. These historical settings provide a fertile ground for exploring themes of identity and self-discovery as characters navigate the challenges and opportunities of their respective time periods.

Intersectionality emerges as a prominent and multi-faceted theme explored within the realm of African American opera, acknowledging that individuals' experiences are intricately shaped by the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality. This noteworthy concept gains significance as it encompasses a holistic understanding that “the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism.”¹³ Characters portrayed in these operas grapple with the profound complexities arising from the convergence of their intersecting identities, which profoundly influence their experiences and opportunities. As bell hooks astutely observes, “My life experience had shown me that the two issues were inseparable, that at the moment of my birth, two factors determined my destiny, my having been born black and my having been born female”¹⁴ - encapsulating the undeniable reality of the inseparable interplay of race and gender in shaping individual destinies.

2.2. Social Justice, Civil Rights, Equality and Freedom

¹³ Kimberlé Crenshaw. “Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics [1989].” *Feminist Legal Theory*, 19 Feb. 2018, pp. 57–80, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429500480-5>.

¹⁴ bell hooks. *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Routledge, 2015.

Within the realm of African American opera, the theme of social justice and civil rights occupies a central position, reflecting the historical experiences and struggles of the African American community. By examining key operas and their narratives, we gain insights into how composers and librettists have engaged with social justice and civil rights, shedding light on the enduring relevance of this theme within the genre. It also serves as a platform for confronting the pervasive inequality and oppression faced by African Americans. These operas “confront the realities of inequality and oppression, providing a space for characters to express their frustrations, aspirations, and hopes for a more just society.”¹⁵ Through narratives that depict racism, discrimination, and systemic injustice, they provoke critical reflection and inspire audiences to engage with the ongoing fight for social justice.

Another important aspect of the theme of social justice and civil rights in African American opera is its emphasis on collective action and resistance. These operas celebrate the resilience and determination of individuals and communities who have fought against injustice. African American opera encourages audiences to recognize the power of collective action and resistance, depicting stories of unity, solidarity, and the quest for a more equitable society. Operas such as *Amistad* — about the successful uprising of enslaved Africans on a ship during the Middle Passage — and *The Central Park Five* — about five African American and Latino teenagers falsely accused and unjustly convicted of a 1980s Central Park rape, both by Anthony Davis, exemplify this theme, showcasing the strength and tenacity of those who have risen against systemic oppression.

¹⁵ Naomi André. *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement*. University of Illinois Press, 2018.

The theme of social justice and civil rights is deeply intertwined with African American opera, reflecting the historical struggles and aspirations of the African American community. Through the exploration of historical context, the confrontation of inequality and oppression, and the empowering narratives of collective action and resistance, African American opera serves as a powerful vehicle for advocating for justice and equality. By examining key operas within this genre, we gain a deeper understanding of the enduring relevance of this theme and its impact on the broader sociopolitical discourse. African American opera continues to be an essential cultural force, inspiring critical reflection and driving progress toward a more just and equitable society.

2.3 Community and Resilience

The theme of community and resilience has a significant presence in African American opera, illuminating the collective strength and endurance of the African American community throughout history. This chapter aims to delve deeper into this theme by exploring how African American opera portrays the power of community bonds and the resilience of individuals and communities in the face of adversity. Through the examination of key operas and their narratives, valuable insights can be gained into the celebration of community spirit and resilience within the genre.

2.3.1. The Power of Community Bonds:

African American opera emphasizes the importance of community bonds as a source of support, strength, and cultural identity. These operas often depict close-knit communities that foster a sense of belonging and collective identity. African American opera celebrates the power of community bonds, portraying the ways in which

individuals find strength and support within their communities. One such opera that vividly portrays the interconnectedness of community members and showcases their resilience and ability to overcome challenges through shared experiences and support is Jeanine Tesori and Tazewell Thompson's *Blue*. A contemporary work about police brutality captures the celebration of new life and the joy, love, and vulnerabilities of protecting a child, as well as the grief and pain of a community and their unheard stories about the consequences of unjust systemic violence. None of the characters are named in this show and are referred to by their identities (mother, father, son, police buddy... etc.), emphasizing the notion that these familial bonds, sense of community, and grief and loss are universal but also prevalent in the African American community.

The theme of community and resilience is a fundamental element within African American opera, highlighting the power of community bonds and the indomitable spirit of individuals and communities. Through the portrayal of close-knit communities, the celebration of resilience in the face of adversity, and the emphasis on cultural preservation and legacy, African American opera serves as a testament to the strength and endurance of the African American community. By examining key operas within this genre, a deeper understanding of the transformative power of community and resilience and their enduring impact on the cultural and social fabric can be gained. African American opera inspires and uplifts us, reminding us of the power of community and the human spirit's triumph.

2.3.2. Resilience, Cultural Preservation and Legacy:

African American opera showcases the resilience of individuals and communities in the face of adversity, highlighting their ability to persevere and thrive despite the

obstacles they encounter. These operas often depict characters who navigate social, economic, and racial challenges, demonstrating their resilience and determination. African American opera portrays the resilience of individuals and communities, shedding light on their ability to rise above adversity and create a better future.

Another important aspect of the theme of community and resilience in African American opera is the preservation of cultural traditions and the passing down of legacies from one generation to another. These operas celebrate the rich cultural heritage of the African American community, showcasing the significance of cultural preservation and the transmission of traditions. African American opera honors the legacies of the past, reinforcing the importance of preserving cultural traditions and passing them on to future generations.

2.3.3. Fiction, Fantasy, and Afrofuturism?

Afrofuturism is a concept that “expresses notions of Black identity, agency and freedom through art, creative works and activism that envision liberated futures for Black life.”¹⁶ It analyzes the intersection of the African diaspora with science and technology. Although coined by a white cultural critic, Mark Dery, in the 1990s, the term was elaborated upon by the discussions of Alondra Nelson and exhibited in works by Samuel R. Delany, Octavia Butler, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Sun Ra, and Parliament Funkadelic.

Despite the dark past of African Americans in the United States, according to leading scholar Naomi André, “Black opera is in a golden age after 200 years of

¹⁶ “Afrofuturism.” *National Museum of African American History and Culture*, 8 Dec. 2023, nmaahc.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/afrofuturism.

contributions by Black singers and composers.”¹⁷ Singers are taking a more hands-on role with the projects being created and produced, and they are telling the stories of our ancestors through the lens of a brighter future. It is from collaborations like these that works like *La'lovavi*, premiering June 19, 2025, at Cincinnati Opera, are born. A commission by Cincinnati Opera’s Artistic Advisor and renowned bass, Morris Robinson, was developed following a frustrated Robinson’s rehearsal of *Porgy and Bess* when he expressed to Evans Mirageas that “*Porgy and Bess* was ‘the only opera where he wasn’t the only Black member of the cast.’”¹⁸ Following grant and proposal approvals, *La'lovavi* was set to become a reality, and composer Kevin Day, librettist Tifara Brown, and dramaturgist Kimille Howard got to work. The plot involves a young woman, Persephone, who was kidnapped and raised in the dystopian city of “Atlas,” whose genetic sequence holds the key to immortality. Through her journey of self-discovery, she returns to her true home of “Nunewaks.” The libretto features an aural tool called tutnese or “tut” developed by enslaved African Americans to teach and learn literacy secretly. This “language,” combined with a robotic-like version of English, used triplet meter and was the catalyst for many musical ideas by the composer. This fusion of past, present, and future will create something that opera has never seen. It’s visionary works like this that audiences have been missing out on for centuries.

Broadening the scope to include works throughout North America introduces us to works like *Of The Sea* by Toronto-based librettist, playwright, and screenwriter Kanika

¹⁷ Scott Jared. “Black Opera Enters a Golden Age.” *College of Arts and Sciences*, The Well, 6 Feb. 2023, college.unc.edu/2023/02/black-opera-enters-a-golden-age/.

¹⁸ A. Kori Hill. “The Black Opera Project Reminds Us That Opera Is a Tool to Tell New Stories.” *I CARE IF YOU LISTEN*, 25 Mar. 2024, icareifyoulisten.com/2024/03/the-black-opera-project-reminds-opera-tool-to-tell-new-stories/.

Ambrose and a dear friend, Ian Cusson. The story follows “Maduka” and his little girl, “Binyelum,” as well as their fellow enslaved Africans who were thrown overboard during the Middle Passage. What we know as the terrible fate of far too many transforms as those thrown overboard now populate a mythical underwater kingdom. “Fiery plans for revenge are made, a parent is blinded by love for their child, and a fight against fate begins.”¹⁹ Through Ambrose’s powerful storytelling and Cusson’s ability to pull light and color through his music, *Of The Sea* is an example of underrepresented people being given the space to express their creativity while telling their own stories.

¹⁹ “Of the Sea - Tapestry Opera.” *Tapestry Opera* -, 23 May 2023, tapestryopera.com/performances/of-the-sea/.

CHAPTER 3: HISTORIES OF MARGINALIZATION

This chapter explores the histories of marginalization within African American opera. We explore African American opera's emergence from spirituals, its distinct forms' development, and its gradual ascent to prominence. Additionally, we examine the role of African American opera houses and ensembles in promoting black lives and talent, advocating for change through performance. Furthermore, this chapter addresses African American opera's challenges due to a lack of preservation and distribution and the lingering effects of racism-based exclusion from the mainstream repertoire. We will comprehensively analyze these issues throughout the chapter, elaborating further in the subsequent sections.

African American opera has its roots in spirituals, which served as a musical expression of the African American experience during times of slavery and oppression. From these humble beginnings, African American opera evolved, developing its own distinct forms and styles that reflected the African American community's unique cultural and social experiences.

"I've sung 97 major roles in major opera houses all over the world. Why is that I'm not good enough to sing in my own country?" -Simon Estes, January 26, 1997, LA Times²⁰

The rise of African American opera was not without its challenges. With discriminatory casting and hiring practices, many black singers did not receive the careers they deserved. World-class baritone Robert McFerrin was the second black

²⁰ Zach Finkelstein, and Jack Lindberg. "Discrimination in Casting Black Singers at the Metropolitan Opera." *Middle Class Artist*, 20 July 2020, www.middleclassartist.com/post/discrimination-in-casting-black-singers-at-the-metropolitan-opera.

singer and first black male to perform at the Metropolitan Opera. He was the first black singer to win the “Auditions of the Air” radio contest, and instead of receiving his promised prize of “half-year training and a contract at the Met,” he was given “13 months training and no contract.”²¹ McFerrin was grateful to learn fencing, ballet, and other stage crafts despite this discrepancy. He made his Met debut as the black Ethiopian King Amansaro, not to display his voice to the best of his ability, but because this role had no love duets with the white ladies of the cast. He never saw either of the female leads before opening night; this lack of interaction was surely an intentional measure put in place by administrators.

Because of discriminatory practices like this, African American opera houses and ensembles played a crucial role in uplifting black people and promoting their talents within the cultural landscape of America. They provided platforms for African American artists to showcase their skills and share their stories. These institutions served as advocates for change, using the power of performance to challenge prevailing norms and advocate for social justice.

However, the journey of African American opera has been hindered by various obstacles. The lack of preservation and distribution has posed significant challenges in ensuring the longevity and accessibility of African American opera works. Many important compositions and performances, such as Shirley Graham Du Bois’ *Tom-Toms*, which, despite drawing a crowd of 10,000 on its opening night and 15,000 the next night, have been lost to time, limiting our understanding of the full breadth and depth of African American opera's contributions.

²¹ Michael B. Dougan “Robert McFerrin Sr. (1921–2006).” *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, 16 June 2023, encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/robert-mcferrin-sr-3266/.

Furthermore, African American opera has faced racism-based exclusion from the mainstream repertoire. This exclusion has perpetuated systemic inequalities and hindered the recognition and appreciation of African American contributions to the operatic tradition. The following sections will delve into these histories of marginalization in greater detail, examining the specific manifestations and impacts of these challenges. Through a comprehensive analysis, we aim to shed light on the struggles and triumphs of African American opera, ultimately advocating for a more inclusive and equitable future for this rich and vibrant art form.

3.1 Emergence from Spirituals and Development of African American Opera

The emergence of African American opera can be traced back to its roots in the rich tradition of spirituals. Spirituals, also known as Negro spirituals, were a form of musical and cultural expression developed by enslaved Africans in America. Dating back to the era of slavery, these songs served as a means of communication, solace, and resistance, blending African musical traditions with biblical themes and narratives. The spirituals were a way for enslaved Africans to communicate with each other and express their emotions, often using coded language and imagery to avoid detection by their slave owners. These songs were often sung in a call-and-response style, with a leader singing a line and the rest of the group responding. This style of singing was later adopted by African American opera companies, who used it to create a sense of community and connection with their audiences. The spirituals provided a creative and spiritual foundation for the development of African American opera. Composers and librettists began to explore new musical forms and narratives that reflected African Americans' unique experiences and cultural identities. They drew inspiration from the

powerful emotional depths and storytelling techniques inherent in spirituals, infusing them into their compositions.

And so by fateful chance the Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands to-day not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas. It has been neglected, it has been, and is, half despised, and above all it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood; but notwithstanding, it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people.”- W.E.B. Du Bois.²²

One notable example of the connection between spirituals and the emergence of African American opera is seen in the work of Harry T. Burleigh, an African American composer and vocalist. Burleigh, known for his spiritual arrangements, played a significant role in introducing spirituals to the classical music world. His arrangements brought the spirituals into concert halls and paved the way for recognizing and accepting African American musical traditions within the classical music canon.

Florence Price and Margaret Bonds, esteemed teacher and student, forged a profound friendship and left indelible marks on the landscape of black folk songs and spirituals. As accomplished pianists and composers, their musical endeavors encompassed the incorporation of distinct black melodies and rhythms. They skillfully crafted arrangements of negro spirituals, occasionally amplifying their impact through orchestral accompaniment. Together, Price and Bonds harnessed their artistic prowess to elevate and celebrate the rich musical heritage of the African American community.

²² W. E. B. Du Bois. "Chapter 14: Of the Sorrow Songs." *The Souls of Black Folk*. Lit2Go Edition. 1903. Web. <<https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/203/the-souls-of-black-folk/4458/chapter-14-of-the-sorrow-songs/>>. April 04, 2024.

Despite receiving European-centered training, Florence Price's musical compositions predominantly embody the essence of the American idiom, revealing her deep-rooted connection to her Southern heritage. Her unique style incorporates vernacular elements that resonate with the realities of urban society. Price's profound religious devotion is evident in her frequent incorporation of African American church music into her arrangements. Influenced by her mentor, George Whitefield Chadwick, Price skillfully weaves elements of African American spirituals into her compositions, focusing not only on the textual content but also on capturing the rhythm and syncopation intrinsic to these spirituals. Her melodies infuse blues-inspired motifs while embracing traditional European Romantic techniques. This intricate fusion of tradition and modernism mirrors the lived experiences of African Americans residing in major cities during that era. Price, unfortunately, died from a stroke, and much of her work was overshadowed by newer musical styles. However, in 2009, a large collection of her works and papers was recovered from an abandoned house. Alex Ross of *The New Yorker* said it best: "Not only did Price fail to enter the canon; a large quantity of her music came perilously close to obliteration. That run-down house in St. Anne is a potent symbol of how a country can forget its cultural history."²³

When exploring the development of African American music and its evolution from spirituals, it is impossible to overlook the profound contributions of William Grant Still, often referred to as the "Dean of Afro-American composers." Forsythe aptly describes Still as a pioneer who skillfully navigated the delicate balance between embracing the past and forging an original artistic vision, stating that he successfully

²³ Alex Ross. "The Rediscovery of Florence Price." *The New Yorker*, The New Yorker, 29 Jan. 2018, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/02/05/the-rediscovery-of-florence-price.

achieved a cohesive synthesis of the two realms²⁴ Like myself, Still's musical journey was influenced by the early exposure to the captivating sounds of his grandmother singing negro spirituals and hymns within his familial home. His exceptional talents propelled him to New York, where he composed a wide range of musical compositions, including orchestral works, Broadway scores, vocal pieces, choral and sacred music, as well as a ballet.

While Still initially shied away from the typecast of spiritual arrangements, his trajectory took a transformative turn when he was approached to create fresh renditions of spirituals with the aim of achieving a novel and distinctive sound. Before this opportunity, he had observed that numerous black composers had gained recognition primarily as arrangers of spirituals, often overshadowing their creative efforts. Still passionately believed that their artistic contributions should extend beyond this limited scope.²⁵ The remarkable oeuvre of William Grant Still encompasses not only spiritual arrangements but also includes the composition of eight operas, effectively bridging the gap between spirituals and the realm of opera. His work stands as a testament to his visionary approach, fusing elements of spiritual traditions with the grandeur of the operatic form. In doing so, Still left an indelible mark on the musical landscape, pushing the boundaries and expanding the possibilities of African American musical expression.

As African American opera developed, it began to incorporate elements of other musical styles, such as minstrelsy and vaudeville. Minstrelsy was a popular form of

²⁴ Harold Bruce Forsythe. "William Grant Still: A Study in Contradictions." William Grant Still: A Study in Contradictions. Ed. Catherine P. Smith. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000. Print.

²⁵ Verna Arvey. "William Grant Still." William Grant Still: A Study in Contradictions. Ed. Catherine P. Smith. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000. Print 330.

entertainment in the 19th century that involved white performers wearing blackface and performing caricatures of African American music and dance. While problematic, minstrelsy helped to popularize African American music and paved the way for the development of African American opera.

Vaudeville was another popular form of entertainment that emerged in the late 19th century. It was a variety show featuring various acts, including music, dance, and comedy. African American opera companies began to perform vaudeville shows, which allowed them to showcase their talents and gain exposure to a wider audience.

African American opera developed its unique style as African American composers and librettists began to explore their distinct musical forms. Composers such as William Grant Still, Scott Joplin, and George Walker experimented with blending elements of European operatic traditions with African American musical idioms, creating a fusion that reflected their cultural heritage and experiences.

This development allowed African American opera to gain prominence and recognition within the broader musical landscape. Compositions such as *Porgy and Bess* by George Gershwin and *Treemonisha* by Scott Joplin showcased the depth and complexity of African American storytelling through operatic narratives. These works gained critical acclaim and resonated with audiences worldwide, highlighting the universal themes of love, struggle, and resilience present in African American opera.

3.1.1 Political Complexities of *Porgy and Bess*

Often hailed as the inaugural masterpiece of American opera, *Porgy and Bess* holds even greater significance due to its depiction of a black American community and its performance by black artists during a time when the white majority in the country

tended to exoticize black culture. Spanning 80 years, *Porgy and Bess* (1935) emerged as one of the most acclaimed American works of the 20th century. However, its performance consistently generated controversy, primarily due to its portrayal of themes, characterizations, and the question of appropriation – an opera centered around black Americans created by white artists. *Porgy and Bess*, while undeniably captivating and thought-provoking, compels us to confront and grapple with these complex issues head-on.

The inception of *Porgy and Bess* arose from the fruitful collaboration between George Gershwin and Dubose Heyward, a prominent figure of the Southern Renaissance. Heyward's libretto drew inspiration from his 1925 novel *Porgy* and the successful Broadway adaptation he co-wrote with his wife Dorothy two years later. George's brother and esteemed collaborator, Ira, joined the creative forces and made notable contributions to the lyrical aspects of the opera. As a result, the authorship of this remarkable work is attributed to the collective genius of both the Gershwin and Heyward families.

The opera *Porgy and Bess* delves into the lives of African American residents residing in a destitute tenement known as "Catfish Row" near the Charleston docks in South Carolina. The depiction of southern black life by white authors has been a subject of controversy surrounding the narrative. While George Gershwin immersed himself in the local community, attending church services and immersing himself in black musical idioms during an extended trip to Charleston, he chose to compose original "spirituals" instead of incorporating pre-existing African American melodies. This decision drew

criticism, particularly considering the opera's subtitle, "An American Folk Opera," as it raises questions about the composer's claim of "folk" authenticity in his original music.

Despite the problematic aspects, the opera, with its music serving as a prominent component, resonates with a broader sense of American identity. This complexity surrounding the "American Folk Opera" description warrants scholarly examination and contemplation.

Since its premiere, *Porgy and Bess* has been scrutinized for its portrayal of black themes and music. In a review published in the black journal *Opportunity* in 1936, Hall Johnson expressed concerns, stating, "What we are to consider...is not a Negro opera by Gershwin, but Gershwin's idea of what a Negro opera should be."²⁶ This remark suggests that *Porgy and Bess* was viewed as a caricature of black artistry.

In Harold Cruse's influential work, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967), he further criticized this aspect of *Porgy and Bess*. Cruse, a professor in the Department of Afroamerican and African Studies (DAAS) at the University of Michigan, argued that the opera must be evaluated from the perspective of the African American community, viewing it as a symbol of the cultural denial, degradation, exclusion, exploitation, and acceptance of white paternalism experienced by black creative artists. Cruse even called for a permanent boycott of the opera.²⁷ These critical perspectives highlight the contentious nature of *Porgy and Bess*, demanding a comprehensive examination and deeper understanding of its implications within the context of African American representation in the arts.

²⁶ Kai West. "Confronting 'Porgy and Bess': Arts & Culture." *Arts & Culture Signature*, University of Michigan, 29 Jan. 2018, arts.umich.edu/news-features/confronting-porgy-and-bess/.

²⁷ Ibid.

Through its emergence from spirituals and the development of its own distinct forms, African American opera was able to carve out a space for itself in the world of classical music. It provided a platform for African American composers, singers, and performers to express their unique voices and experiences, challenging the dominant narrative and expanding the boundaries of what was considered "operatic."

The rise of African American opera was not without its challenges. Many companies struggled to find funding and support, and they often faced discrimination and racism from the broader musical community. Despite these challenges, African American opera continued to thrive, with companies like the New York City-based Metropolitan Opera Company and the Houston-based Opera in the Heights producing works by African American composers and showcasing the talents of African American singers.

In recent years, African American opera has continued to evolve and innovate, incorporating elements of hip-hop, jazz, and other musical styles. Companies like the Los Angeles-based Black Opera Alliance and the San Francisco-based Opera Parallèle are working to promote diversity and inclusion in the opera world, providing opportunities for African American singers and composers to showcase their talents and tell their stories.

Overall, the emergence of African American opera from spirituals, minstrelsy, and vaudeville helped to establish a rich and diverse musical tradition that continues to thrive today. Despite the challenges faced by African American opera companies and artists, they have made significant contributions to the world of opera and have played a crucial role in promoting social justice and equality.

The prominence achieved by African American opera serves as a testament to the power of cultural expression and the resilience of a community seeking to reclaim its narrative. By drawing upon the musical traditions of spirituals and infusing them with new forms, African American opera gained recognition and became a powerful vehicle for storytelling and cultural representation. The journey from spirituals to African American opera represents a powerful and transformative evolution, demonstrating the ability of an art form to transcend adversity and create a lasting impact on the world stage.

3.2 Promotion of Black Lives and Talent

African American opera houses and ensembles played a pivotal role in promoting and uplifting black lives and talent within America's cultural landscape. These institutions provided platforms for African American artists and performers to showcase their skills, share their stories, and challenge prevailing societal norms. By creating spaces exclusively dedicated to African American opera, these establishments became catalysts for social and political change, artistic expression, and community empowerment.

Beyond providing opportunities for individual artists, African American opera houses and ensembles played a crucial role in fostering a sense of community and pride. These institutions became cultural hubs that celebrated African American heritage, history, and creativity. By showcasing works rooted in the African American experience, they promoted a sense of identity, resilience, and cultural affirmation among both artists and audiences.

In addition to opera houses, African American opera ensembles emerged as powerful forces in promoting black lives and talent. One notable ensemble is the National Negro Opera Company (NNOC), founded in Pittsburgh in 1941 by Mary Cardwell Dawson. The NNOC provided opportunities for African American singers, composers, directors, and technicians, enabling them to participate in creating and performing operatic works that reflected their lived experiences. Through its productions and outreach programs, the NNOC aimed to challenge racial stereotypes, inspire social change, and promote the artistic excellence of African American performers.

These opera houses and ensembles provided platforms for African American talent and actively engaged with their communities. They organized educational initiatives, workshops, and mentorship programs to nurture young aspiring artists, ensuring the continuity of African American opera traditions. By fostering a supportive environment that recognized and celebrated black lives and talent, these institutions empowered individuals and communities, instilling a sense of pride, agency, and cultural ownership.

Moreover, the impact of African American opera houses and ensembles extended beyond the confines of their immediate communities. These institutions brought African American opera to national and international audiences through their performances, recordings, and tours. They challenged prevailing racial prejudices and shattered stereotypes by showcasing African American performers' artistic brilliance and storytelling prowess. This exposure not only broadened the appreciation for African American opera but also provided a platform for black voices to be heard, valued, and respected on a global scale.

African American opera houses and ensembles made significant contributions to the advancement of African American opera. They provided platforms for African American artistic expression, challenged societal norms, fostered synergistic environments, and provided a sense of cultural affirmation. Through their commitment to excellence, empowerment, and social change, they paved the way for future generations of African American musicians, enriching the world of opera with diverse perspectives, narratives, and artistic brilliance.

3.3 Advocacy and Change Through Performance

Addressing the marginalization of African American opera and advocating for change requires a multifaceted approach that encompasses both structural reforms and the transformative power of performance. By implementing strategies to challenge systemic barriers, promoting inclusivity, and utilizing the platform of performance, meaningful change can be enacted to reshape the landscape of African American opera.

One crucial aspect of enacting change is to address the underrepresentation of African American composers, librettists, and performers within the opera industry. This can be achieved by advocating for increased diversity and inclusion in casting, programming, and artistic leadership positions. Opera companies and institutions should actively seek out and engage African American artists, providing them with opportunities to showcase their talents and contribute to the artistic repertoire. By intentionally diversifying the creative teams and decision-making processes, the industry can begin to dismantle the marginalization that has historically limited African American participation in opera.

Furthermore, education plays a vital role in challenging the marginalization of African American opera. It is essential to implement comprehensive curricula that include the study of African American composers and performers and their contributions to the operatic tradition. Incorporating diverse narratives and perspectives into the music education program would provide students with a deeper understanding and appreciation for the richness of African American opera. Educational institutions, opera companies, and community organizations should collaborate to provide workshops, masterclasses, and mentorship programs that empower aspiring African American opera artists and instill a sense of cultural pride and ownership.

Efforts to preserve and restore African American operas should be actively supported. This includes encouraging collaborations between academic institutions, libraries, and cultural organizations to digitize and archive scores, librettos, and recordings. Additionally, funding and grants should be provided to support research, reconstruction, and performance of neglected African American operas. Prioritization of preservation initiatives is necessary to ensure that these valuable works are not lost to history and can be accessible to future generations. Advocacy through performance is another powerful tool for enacting change. American opera companies and ensembles should continue to produce and perform works that address social justice issues, celebrate black culture, and amplify African American voices. By choosing repertoire that reflects African Americans' diverse experiences, these companies can challenge the status quo, spark dialogue, and inspire audiences to confront systemic racism and inequality. Collaborations with other opera companies, both nationally and

internationally, can also facilitate the dissemination of African American opera, broadening its reach and impact.

Opera companies and performance organizations should actively seek to diversify their programming by including more works by African American composers. This can be achieved through commissioning new works, reviving neglected operas, and incorporating African American operas into their regular seasons. By embracing diversity in programming, these organizations can contribute to a more inclusive repertoire, challenge traditional biases, and provide platforms for African American composers and performers.

Furthermore, engaging with communities and fostering dialogue through outreach programs can be an effective means of advocating for change. Opera companies should actively collaborate with local schools, community centers, and organizations to bring opera to diverse audiences, especially those who may not have had previous exposure to the art form. As a result of these efforts, African American composers and performers can overcome challenging stereotypes, break down barriers, and cultivate new audiences, which is a significant benefit of expanding the operatic canon.

Lastly, technology and digital platforms can significantly promote African American opera and advocate for change. Leveraging social media, streaming services, and online platforms can amplify the voices of African American opera artists, increase visibility, and reach a global audience. Embracing innovative technologies and virtual performances can also open doors to new creative possibilities, allowing for greater collaboration, experimentation, and artistic expression.

Enacting change in the marginalization of African American opera requires a comprehensive and collaborative effort. By addressing systemic barriers, promoting inclusivity, and utilizing the transformative power of performance, the industry can work towards a more equitable and diverse landscape. Through advocacy, education, community engagement, and the strategic use of technology, African American opera can transcend its marginalization, amplify its impact, and contribute to a more inclusive and vibrant operatic tradition.

3.4 Limitations of Preservation, Distribution, and Mainstream Repertoire

African American opera has faced significant challenges stemming from a lack of preservation and distribution and racism-based exclusion from the mainstream repertoire. These limitations have hindered the recognition, appreciation, and accessibility of African American operatic works. This section explores the impact of these challenges and provides examples to illustrate the extent to which African American opera has been affected.

One of the primary obstacles facing African American opera is the lack of preservation of its works. Despite their artistic and cultural significance, many African American operas have been neglected or lost over time. The absence of proper preservation efforts has resulted in a gap in the historical record and a loss of valuable artistic contributions.

An example of this is the opera *Voodoo*, which Harry Lawrence Freeman composed in 1914. Considered the first opera by an African American composer to be performed by a major opera company, *Voodoo* received critical acclaim during its initial run. However, the score and libretto were lost due to a lack of preservation efforts, and

the opera fell into obscurity. It was only rediscovered and reconstructed in recent years, highlighting the need for concerted preservation efforts to safeguard African American operatic works.

African American opera has also faced challenges in terms of distribution. The limited availability and accessibility of recordings, scores, and performance opportunities have contributed to the marginalization of African American operas. Without widespread distribution, these works struggle to reach broader audiences, limiting their impact and recognition.

An illustrative example is William Grant Still's opera *Troubled Island*, which premiered in 1949. *Troubled Island* was the first opera by an African American composer to be performed by a major opera company in the United States. Despite its historical significance and critical acclaim, the opera has rarely been performed since its premiere, and recordings are scarce. The limited distribution of *Troubled Island* has hindered its exposure and prevented it from becoming a staple in the operatic repertoire.

African American opera has often been excluded from the mainstream repertoire due to racism and biases within the classical music industry. Works by African American composers have been overlooked or undervalued, resulting in a limited presence in major opera houses and performance seasons. This exclusion perpetuates a cycle of marginalization, denying African American operas the recognition and exposure they deserve.

Scott Joplin's opera *Treemonisha* serves as a prominent example of racism-based exclusion. Composed in the early 20th century, *Treemonisha* explores themes of

education, community, and empowerment within the African American experience. Despite its historical significance and musical brilliance, the opera faced rejection from mainstream opera companies during Joplin's lifetime. Only in 1972, over 50 years after Joplin's death, *Treemonisha* received its first full opera house production. The delayed recognition of *Treemonisha* highlights the systemic biases and racism that have limited the inclusion of African American operas in the mainstream repertoire.

The limitations of preservation, distribution, and racism-based exclusion have significantly impacted African American opera, hindering its recognition and accessibility. The lack of preservation efforts has resulted in the loss of valuable works, while limited distribution has restricted the exposure and reach of African American operas. Additionally, racism within the classical music industry has perpetuated the exclusion of African American operas from the mainstream repertoire. The examples provided, such as *Voodoo*, *Troubled Island*, and *Treemonisha*, underscore the need for greater efforts to preserve, distribute, and promote African American opera. By addressing these limitations, we can work towards a more inclusive and diverse operatic landscape, ensuring the recognition and appreciation of the remarkable contributions made by African American composers to the world of opera.

CHAPTER 4: BARRIERS TO WIDER INCLUSION

Chapter 4 delves into the barriers that hinder the wider inclusion of African American opera within the broader context of American opera and classical music. This chapter critically examines the perceived difficulties arising from the limited scope and narrow definitions of genre and tradition, shedding light on the racism embedded within academia and the opera industry. Moreover, it explores the false dichotomies perpetuated by the classical versus folk categorization, which unjustly prioritizes certain legacies over others. Additionally, this chapter addresses the lack of policy changes necessary to promote access, representation, and the dismantling of disadvantages faced by composers and performers of African American operatic works.

A central focus of this chapter is the examination of the false dichotomies that persistently emerge in discussions surrounding African American opera, notably the dichotomy of "classical" versus "folk" music. These artificial divisions have created an unequal hierarchy that undermines the diverse contributions and artistic merits of African American opera. By challenging these false dichotomies, this chapter aims to dismantle the barriers that limit the appreciation and recognition of African American opera as a legitimate and significant genre within the broader operatic and classical music traditions.

Moreover, this chapter critically addresses the lack of policy changes that hinder access, representation, and the dismantling of disadvantages faced by composers and performers of African American operatic works. It explores the systemic biases and structural inequalities within academia and the opera industry, which perpetuate a cycle of limited opportunities and hinder the growth of African American opera. By shedding

light on these issues, this chapter seeks to advocate for policy changes that foster inclusivity, representation, and equal opportunities for African American composers and performers.

Exploring racism in academia and the opera industry is vital to understanding the barriers faced by African American opera. This chapter will critically analyze how entrenched biases and discriminatory practices have hindered African American operatic works' recognition, study, and dissemination. By questioning the existing systems and structures, this chapter aims to challenge the status quo and pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable future for African American opera.

4.1 Perceived Difficulty

Integrating African American opera into the mainstream operatic canon has been met with perceived difficulties due to the limited scope and narrow definitions of genre and tradition within the classical music and opera industry. This section explores the challenges faced in recognizing and incorporating African American opera within the broader operatic canon, highlighting specific examples that illustrate the complexities of this endeavor.

One of the primary challenges lies in the limited scope of what is traditionally considered "operatic." These stories often center on White Western Europeans' histories, religion, society, and musical idioms and have historically shaped the criteria for inclusion in the canon, often excluding works that do not conform to its established norms. This narrow perspective has limited the recognition and appreciation of African American opera, which draws from different cultural and musical traditions and incorporates unique stylistic elements and narratives.

For instance, consider the opera *Porgy and Bess*, composed by George Gershwin with a libretto by DuBose Heyward. Despite its groundbreaking significance and artistic excellence, *Porgy and Bess* initially faced challenges in being recognized as a true opera due to its fusion of operatic, jazz, and folk elements. Its classification as a folk opera rather than a traditional European opera exemplifies the limited definitions and expectations imposed on the genre.

Furthermore, the narrow definitions of genre within the operatic canon have often relegated African American opera to the periphery. Works that incorporate elements from African American musical traditions, such as gospel, blues, or jazz, have been viewed as deviating from the established operatic norms. This exclusionary mindset has hindered the recognition and acceptance of African American opera as a legitimate genre within the broader operatic tradition.

An example that exemplifies this challenge is Scott Joplin's opera *Treemonisha*, a pioneering work that blends operatic elements with ragtime music. Despite its innovative approach and significant historical value, *Treemonisha* faced difficulties in gaining recognition within the mainstream operatic canon due to its departure from traditional European operatic conventions.

The lack of representation and recognition of African American opera within critical discourse has also contributed to the perceived difficulty of integration. Limited scholarly research, reviews, and discussions surrounding African American opera have resulted in a lack of visibility and understanding within academic circles and the broader opera community. This absence further reinforces African American composers' and performers' barriers to gaining recognition and acceptance.

African American opera composers such as William Grant Still and Scott Joplin have made significant contributions to the genre. Yet, their works have received less attention and scholarly analysis compared to their European counterparts. The lack of critical discourse and academic engagement hinders the integration of African American opera into the mainstream operatic canon. Examples such as *Porgy and Bess*, *Treemonisha*, and *A Bayou Legend* illustrate the challenges faced by African American opera in gaining recognition and acceptance within the broader operatic canon. Expanding the scope and redefining the boundaries of what is considered operatic is crucial for embracing the richness and diversity of African American opera and ensuring its rightful place within the operatic tradition.

4.2 Racism in Academia and the Opera Industry

The classical music academia and opera industry have long been plagued by exclusionary practices rooted in racism, which have perpetuated a cycle of marginalization and limited opportunities for Black musicians, composers, and performers. This section aims to shed light on some of these exclusionary practices that have hindered the progress of racial equity and inclusivity within these realms.

4.2.1. Hiring and Casting Biases:

Historically, leading roles for Black performers were limited, even when highly talented artists were available. This enforced segregation both on and offstage, contributing to the exclusion of Black artists from mainstream opera productions well into the mid-20th century. Biases in casting decisions perpetuated racial disparities and denied Black performers equal opportunities to showcase their talents and contribute to the operatic canon.

The “Middleclass Artist compiled data from the Metropolitan Opera’s Public Database from 1883-2020 to answer the question of whether there is “quantitative evidence of historical discrimination in the casting of Black singers at the Metropolitan Opera.”²⁸ Their data only reflected 761 “regulars” — soloists in lead or supporting roles who have performed onstage at the Met at least 100 times.”²⁹ Of the 761 Met regulars, only 21 were black, or 3%. Among all regulars, non-black singers performed about 58% more often than black singers.³⁰ Based on the Met’s history, arguably the largest operatic stage in the United States, you can conclude that black singers are far less represented on stage. The exclusion of black singers has endured for over a century, and although there are amends being made, there is still much work to accomplish.

This discrepancy in representation expands backstage as well. Opera Americas’s 2021 Field-Wide Snapshot illuminates the demographics of opera administrators throughout the country and compares it to that of the nation. They found that “20.6% of opera administrators identify as BIPOC, with a nearly even distribution among staff who describe themselves as Black, Hispanic/Latinx, and Asian/Pacific Islander/South Asian.”³¹ This is significantly lower than the national BIPOC population of 39.3%. This variance is highlighted even more when observing the 18% of leadership staff who

²⁸ Zach Finkelstein, and Jack Lindberg. “Discrimination in Casting Black Singers at the Metropolitan Opera.” *Middle Class Artist*, 20 July 2020, www.middleclassartist.com/post/discrimination-in-casting-black-singers-at-the-metropolitan-opera.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Field-Wide Opera Demographic Report 2021.” *FIELD-WIDE OPERA DEMO“GRAPHIC REPORT 2021*, Opera America, www.operaamerica.org/media/afsfdynw/demographicsreport_final_6-21-22.pdf. Accessed 5 Apr. 2024.

identify as BIPOC vs. the 80.5% who identify as white.³² Despite the efforts being made by allies to diversity and inclusion, these disparities in representation are noteworthy and directly impact who is hired, which operas are being programmed, the funding of said operas, and artist pay, further contributing to inequalities in the opera industry.

4.2.2. Audition Requirements and Expectations:

Audition requirements and expectations often centered on vocal agility, ranges, and timbres preferred in European works, marginalizing vocal styles from other traditions. This narrow focus excluded performers who possessed unique vocal qualities that did not conform to Eurocentric standards. The industry disregarded the richness and diversity of vocal styles from different cultural backgrounds by prioritizing a specific vocal aesthetic.

Julia Eklund Koza's groundbreaking work, "Listening for Whiteness: Hearing Racial Politics in Undergraduate School Music," offers invaluable insights that can resonate beyond the realm of undergraduate education. This observation echoes the practices observed in graduate school auditions, operatic competitions, and auditions for young artists. From an academic standpoint, there is a primary issue of access. She affirms that "As recently as a generation ago, the unwritten rule that undergraduate music students need many years of prior private study did not typically apply to vocalists. Past wisdom claimed that the voice did not begin to mature until late adolescence, and private study for younger students was deemed of limited value if the voice was not ready."³³ Koza attributes the differences in musical knowledge and

³² Ibid.

³³ Julia Eklund Koza. "Listening for Whiteness: Hearing Racial Politics in Undergraduate School Music." *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, Indiana University Press, 9 Jan. 2009, muse.jhu.edu/article/257221.

technical quality to a widening affluence gap in the United States. Because the affluence gap, like many areas in U.S. society, is tinged in racism and discrimination, the admissions and audition process too becomes racially discriminatory. In these auditions, there is an emphasis on the European bel canto tradition. “The repertoire requirements are forthright in their specificity about what will or will not be valued,”³⁴ so this eliminates students who may not have the resources to prepare such repertoire but have the potential to learn and thrive in the genre. Engaging in substantial conversations about race can serve as a catalyst for questioning the overt and covert intentions of music education within schools. Recognizing the deeply embedded nature of racial politics may prompt a shift in perspectives, fostering a more localized and equitable approach to multicultural music education. By closely aligning with principles of equity, this reevaluation offers the potential for a more inclusive and enriched educational environment.

4.2.3. Lack of Outreach and Recruiting Efforts:

The lack of outreach and recruiting efforts in Black communities further contributed to the underrepresentation of Black talent in classical music academia and the opera industry. Institutions failed to acknowledge potential talent pools that were being overlooked due to concentrated recruitment efforts at elite conservatories. This lack of proactive outreach contributed to the underlying barriers, resulting in exclusive traditions in the education and professional environments.

4.2.4. Deficiencies in Scholarship, Teaching, and Programming:

³⁴ Ibid.

Deficiencies in scholarship, teaching, and programming have also played a role in perpetuating racist practices within classical music academia and the opera industry. African influences on genres such as spirituals and masking practices that blended into plantation songs and minstrelsy were often overlooked or marginalized. The absence of comprehensive examination and recognition of these influences contributes to the lack of cultural preservation and, ultimately, the erasure of significant contributions and interpretations of Black artists.

4.2.5. Tokenistic Programming:

Tokenistic programming is another exclusionary practice prevalent within the opera industry. Works by Black composers were often presented as novel exceptions rather than recognized as part of a broader lineage of artistic expression. By treating these works as mere tokens, the industry failed to recognize and sustainably include the stylistic traits and narratives that deserved long-term representation. These types of behavioral barriers stymied the advancement and modernization of the Opera canon and its audience

4.2.6. Lack of Representation in Leadership Roles:

The absence of prominent Black conductors, administrators, and other leadership roles within classical music academia and the opera industry has perpetuated a lack of holistic diversification of perspectives. This absence limits the influence and decision-making power of Black creatives and hinders the industry's ability to address systemic racism effectively. Without diverse perspectives and voices in decision-making positions, the path to holistic diversification becomes significantly hindered, and opportunities for transformative change remain limited.

4.2.7. Deficiencies in Preservation and Funding:

Deficiencies in preservation efforts have contributed to the extinction of works, documents, and performances, further reinforcing the perception of non-viability rather than actively preserving and promoting Black operatic works. Disproportionate funding allocations have also reinforced imbalances in the types of works supported for development and mainstream exposure, contributing to a cycle of limited resources for Black composers and performers.

The examples of exclusionary practices discussed in this section highlight the deep-rooted racism within classical music academia and the opera industry. Addressing these practices requires a comprehensive commitment to dismantling systemic barriers and promoting inclusivity. By challenging biases, increasing outreach and representation, diversifying programming, and allocating resources equitably, the industry can begin to rectify the historical imbalances and foster a more inclusive and equitable environment for Black artists in opera.

4.3 False Dichotomies: "Classical" vs. "Folk"

The distinction between classical and folk music has historically perpetuated a hierarchy that favors Western European traditions and marginalizes non-European musical forms. This false dichotomy has often relegated African American opera, which draws from diverse cultural and musical traditions, to the realm of folk music, thereby undermining its recognition as a legitimate and valuable component of the classical canon. Douglas Shadle insists, "Classical music culture, far more than the culture of

other arts, remains essentially fixated on canonicity—on apotheosizing 'the greatest' composers and 'the best' repertoire."³⁵

Antonín Dvořák, a prominent Czech composer, exemplified the integration of folk music into classical compositions. During his time in the United States, Dvořák recognized the significance of African American spirituals and Native American melodies. He acknowledged their inherent musicality and employed them as foundational elements in his compositions, most notably in his "Symphony No. 9" (commonly known as the "New World Symphony"). Dvořák's recognition of the value of folk music from non-European cultures demonstrates the fallacy of the classical vs. folk divide and highlights the potential for fruitful integration.

Renowned Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky also embraced folk music as a vital source of inspiration. Works like *Swan Lake* and *The Nutcracker* integrate Russian folk melodies and dances, showcasing the richness and vitality of Russian musical traditions. Tchaikovsky's incorporation of folk elements showcases folk music's versatility and challenges the notion that classical compositions should solely draw from Western European traditions. His example further dismantles the false dichotomy that separates classical and folk genres, emphasizing the blurred lines and interconnectedness between them.

With its vast array of musical influences and cultural narratives, African American opera should not be confined to the limited label of folk music. It encompasses a wide range of musical styles, including classical, jazz, gospel, blues, and more. By acknowledging African American opera's inherent musical and artistic value, we can

³⁵ Douglas Shadle. "Classical Music and the Color Line." *Boston Review*, 14 Nov. 2022, www.bostonreview.net/articles/classical-music-color-line/.

challenge the false dichotomies that prioritize certain legacies over others and recognize the significant contributions of African American composers and performers to the classical canon.

Challenging the false dichotomy of classical versus folk is essential to recognizing African American opera's value and artistic merit. By embracing the diverse influences and cultural expressions within African American opera, we can challenge the limited categorization and expand the boundaries of the classical music tradition.

4.4 Lack of Policy changes for access and representation

One of the key issues is the limited access to resources and opportunities for African American composers and performers in the world of opera. The lack of policy changes that facilitate access to education and training opportunities for African American composers and performers in opera has sustained disparities. Limited financial resources, unequal distribution of resources, and systemic biases have hindered the ability of aspiring African American opera professionals to access quality education and training programs. Policy changes should focus on ensuring equitable access to educational and training opportunities, including scholarships, mentorship programs, and outreach initiatives specifically targeted at marginalized communities.

Moreover, the cycle of exclusion can also be attributed to the underrepresentation of African American composers and performers in mainstream opera houses. These institutions' lack of diverse voices contributes to the underrepresentation of African American stories, stylistic interpretations, and musical traditions onstage. This exclusionary practice limits the visibility and recognition of

African American opera and reinforces the notion that it is a niche genre rather than an integral part of the operatic tradition.

To address these challenges, policy changes are necessary to promote access and representation of African American opera. Firstly, funding organizations and institutions should allocate dedicated resources like access to rehearsal spaces or recording studios to support the creation, production, and promotion of African American operatic works. This also includes establishing grants, fellowships, and scholarships specifically targeting African American artists and funding initiatives prioritizing the development of diverse voices within the opera industry. Policy changes should also include increased funding for African American opera initiatives, as limited financial support and resources for American composers and performers have historically restricted their ability to create and promote their works effectively.

Opera houses and companies should actively work to diversify their programming and casting choices. This involves creating opportunities for African American composers to have their works commissioned and performed and ensuring that African American performers have equal access to auditions and roles. By actively seeking out and showcasing African American talent, opera institutions can contribute to a more enriched and inclusive landscape within the industry.

Policy changes should prioritize the implementation of cultural awareness and sensitivity training for opera professionals, administrators, and educators. This training can help dismantle biases, challenge stereotypes, and foster a more inclusive and synergistic environment within the opera industry. By promoting understanding and

appreciation of diverse cultural expressions, policy changes can contribute to the recognition and acceptance of African American opera as mainstream.

CHAPTER 5: STRATEGIES FOR INTEGRATING INTO STANDARD REPERTOIRE

This chapter explores strategies for integrating African American opera into the standard repertoire by amplifying unheard stories through education, exposure, and inclusivity. It discusses the importance of policy changes in audition requirements, curriculum reforms, and anti-discrimination guidelines to remedy the marginalization of African American opera. Additionally, this chapter explores practical considerations such as vocal range, instrumentation, and editing/arranging for greater accessibility. Finally, it delves into the significance of legitimization through performances, recordings, activism, and scholarship, highlighting their role in enabling prominence and sustainability within the opera community.

To integrate African American opera into the standard repertoire, it is crucial to amplify unheard stories and perspectives. This can be achieved through educational initiatives that promote the study and performance of African American opera works in schools, conservatories, and opera training programs. By incorporating African American opera into curricula and providing exposure to diverse repertoire, students and performers can gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for these works. Furthermore, fostering inclusivity within opera companies and performance venues by actively seeking out and showcasing African American opera can help ensure the representation and recognition of these stories.

Policy changes play a vital role in remedying the marginalization of African American opera. Audition requirements should be revised to include a more diverse range of repertoire, allowing for the inclusion of African American works alongside traditional operatic selections. Curriculum reforms within educational institutions should

aim to integrate African American opera into vocal and opera programs, ensuring that students receive comprehensive training in diverse repertoire. Additionally, implementing anti-discrimination guidelines within the industry can help address biases and prejudices that have hindered the recognition and performance of African American opera.

African American opera requires legitimization within the opera community to achieve prominence and sustainability. This can be accomplished through increased performances of African American opera works in major opera houses and concert halls and recordings that capture and preserve these performances for wider dissemination. Activism in advocating for the recognition and inclusion of African American opera is also crucial. Furthermore, scholarship that delves into these works' historical, cultural, and musical contexts can contribute to their acceptance within academia and the broader opera community.

In recent years, American opera institutions have increasingly recognized the need for comprehensive reforms to address longstanding exclusionary practices and promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. This section examines some of the current initiatives that are being implemented to rectify these issues systematically. While progress remains ongoing, these multi-pronged reforms aim to dismantle entrenched disadvantages and create a more inclusive operatic landscape.

One significant area of reform is the implementation of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives within opera institutions. This involves reforming hiring practices, casting procedures, recruiting methods, and leadership development programs. Anti-bias training is being introduced to raise awareness of implicit biases and foster more

inclusive decision-making processes. Community outreach efforts are being expanded to engage with underrepresented communities and encourage their participation in the opera world. Furthermore, targeted recruitment strategies are being employed to attract and support diverse talent, ensuring that opera institutions reflect the broader diversity of society.

5.1 Amplifying Unheard Stories through Education, Exposure, and Inclusivity

In order to cultivate a new generation of artists, opera institutions are developing new professional training and apprenticeship models centered around diverse repertoires. By providing opportunities for aspiring artists to engage with a range of works, institutions are fostering a more inclusive and diverse pool of talent.

Opera institutions are actively engaging with communities through initiatives such as opera workshops and partnerships with schools. These community-engaged programs aim to cultivate new audiences and identify talent from underrepresented backgrounds, ensuring that opera remains accessible and relevant to diverse communities.

5.2 Audition Requirements, Curriculum Reforms, and Anti-Discrimination Guidelines

Curricular reforms, particularly in higher education, are also being implemented to provide comprehensive instruction on African American opera history and traditions and the global influences on various genres, including musical theater. By incorporating nuanced and robust educational content, institutions are striving to instill a deeper understanding and appreciation of diverse artistic traditions within their students and faculty.

Opera institutions are also addressing the need for anti-racism and implicit bias programming within their staff, administrators, and boards. These programs are designed to foster organizational culture change by challenging and dismantling systemic biases. By actively engaging in self-reflection and education, institutions aim to create more inclusive and equitable environments for all.

Reforms are also being pursued through anti-racist policy changes within unions and arts service organizations. These changes address issues such as recruitment, casting practices, and funding allocation protocols, aiming to eliminate discriminatory practices and promote equal opportunities for all artists.

Table 1: Opera America Reformation

Name of Initiative	Description	Link
Racial Justice Opera Network	OPERA America's Racial Justice Opera Network is an action group of opera professionals from all sectors of the field who are committed to enriching our art form and industry by seeking racial equity.	https://www.operaamerica.org/get-involved/affinity-groups/racial-justice-opera-network/
IDEA Opera Grants	This annual grant supports the promotion and development of new works by artists who identify as one or more of these racial and ethnic heritages: Arab, Asian, Black, Latinx, Native American, and Pacific Islander.	https://www.operaamerica.org/programs/services/grants-awards/artists/idea-opera-grants/
Mentorship Program for Opera Leaders of Color	The Mentorship Program for Opera Leaders of Color provides support for BIPOC administrators who are at the threshold of taking their next leadership step. It pairs them with more seasoned leaders in the opera field who can serve as coaches and advocates.	https://www.operaamerica.org/programs/services/leadership-development/mentorship-program-for-opera-leaders-of-color/
OPERA America's Commitment to Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity	OPERA America believes that opera companies have an obligation to be more reflective of their communities and that the art form and the industry gain from diversity, equity and inclusion.	https://www.operaamerica.org/industry-resources/2019/201901/opera-america-s-commitment-to-equity-diversity-and-inclusivity/

5.3 Legitimization through Performances, Recordings, Activism, and Scholarship

To promote multicultural programming, institutions are making commitments to support new commissions and co-productions with historically Black colleges and universities. Financial support is being provided to facilitate creating and staging works that authentically represent diverse stories and perspectives.

Furthermore, scholarly research, conferences, and publications are playing a vital role in reframing the development of the operatic canon. By critically examining and challenging existing notions of "masterworks" and expanding the critical lenses through

which opera is analyzed, institutions are actively contributing to the progressive evolution of the field.

Table 2: African American Opera Conferences

Name of Conference	Link to more info
Black Identities on the Operatic Stage: A Symposium with Music at UNC Greensboro.	https://vpa.uncg.edu/single-event/black-identities-on-the-operatic-stage-a-symposium-with-music/
BWIO Fest: Black Opera Singers Conference	https://www.ifundwomen.com/projects/bwio-fest-2021-black-opera-singers-conference
Afro-Diasporic Opera Forum	https://iceorg.org/aof
Black Administrators of Opera Symposium	https://blackadmofopera.medium.com/

While the journey towards inclusivity and equity in American opera institutions is far from complete, these multi-pronged reforms demonstrate a commitment to systematically address and remedy the long-standing disadvantages that have persisted within the field. Through collective efforts and ongoing initiatives, the hope is to create a more equitable and inclusive operatic landscape that celebrates all artists' diverse voices and contributions.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This dissertation has explored the significant efforts being made to address longstanding exclusionary practices in American opera institutions and promote diversity, equity, and inclusion within the field. Through a multi-pronged approach encompassing various initiatives, opera institutions are actively working towards rectifying historical inequities and creating a more inclusive operatic landscape.

Opera institutions' diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives aim to reform hiring, casting, recruiting, and leadership development practices. By incorporating anti-bias training, community outreach, and targeted recruitment, institutions are actively working to create a more diverse and representative opera community. These initiatives are crucial in ensuring that the opera world reflects the broader diversity of society and provides equitable opportunities for all artists.

Revising standardized audition requirements and expectations is another important aspect of the reforms being undertaken. By challenging traditional parameters and embracing a wider range of vocal styles and characteristics, opera institutions are fostering a more inclusive and expressive environment. Blind auditions are also being adopted to promote unbiased evaluation and provide opportunities for individuals who may have faced discrimination in the past.

Curricular reforms play a vital role in providing comprehensive instruction on African American opera history and traditions, as well as exploring the global influences on various genres. By incorporating nuanced and robust educational content, institutions are equipping students and faculty with a deeper understanding and appreciation of diverse artistic traditions.

Efforts to address anti-racism and implicit bias within opera institutions are also underway. Through targeted programming and education, staff, administrators, and boards are actively engaging in organizational culture change. These initiatives aim to challenge and dismantle systemic biases, fostering more inclusive and equitable environments.

Preservation and archival investments are being made to rectify the historical asset-stripping and lack of documentation of marginalized works, performances, and artists. By recognizing and celebrating these valuable contributions, opera institutions are ensuring that the rich legacy of African American opera is not forgotten and remains accessible for future generations.

Multicultural programming commitments and financial support for new commissions and co-productions with historically Black colleges and universities are essential in promoting diverse stories and perspectives within the operatic canon. These initiatives provide platforms for underrepresented artists and contribute to a more inclusive repertoire.

Moreover, the development of new professional training and apprenticeship models centered on diverse repertoires is critical in nurturing and supporting the next generation of artists. By providing opportunities to engage with a range of works, institutions are fostering a more inclusive and diverse pool of talent.

Policy reforms through unions and arts service organizations are instrumental in addressing issues of recruitment, casting practices, and funding allocation protocols. These reforms aim to eliminate discriminatory practices and promote equal opportunities for all artists.

Community-engaged initiatives, such as opera workshops and school partnerships, are cultivating new audiences and talent from underrepresented backgrounds. These efforts ensure that opera remains accessible and relevant to diverse communities.

Scholarly research, conferences, and publications are vital in reframing the development of the operatic canon. By critically examining and challenging existing notions of "masterworks" and expanding the critical lenses through which opera is analyzed, institutions are actively contributing to the progressive evolution of the field.

In conclusion, although advancements have been made, the journey towards progress is still ongoing and incomplete. The comprehensive reforms discussed in this dissertation aim to remedy entrenched disadvantages within American opera institutions systematically. By implementing initiatives that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion, opera institutions are working towards a more inclusive and equitable operatic landscape. These efforts celebrate the rich contributions of African American opera and pave the way for a future where all artists are valued, represented, and supported. Through collective action and ongoing commitment, the operatic community can continue to strive for a more inclusive and diverse art form that reflects the richness and contributions of all cultures and voices.

APPENDIX

Table 3: Productions of African American Operas since 2023 via OperaBase (By Date)

Company	Production	Composer/Librettist	Date
Opera Birmingham	DWB (Driving While Black)	Susan Kander/Roberta Gumbel	January 2023
New Orleans Opera	Charlie Parker's Yardbird	Daniel Schnyder/Bridgette A. Wimberly	January 2023
Opera Carolina	Porgy & Bess	George Gershwin/Ira Gershwin, DuBose Heyward	January 2023
Lyric Opera of Chicago	Champion	Terence Blanchard/Michael Cristofer	January/February 2024
Cleveland Opera	Highway 1 U.S.A.	William Grant Still/Verna Arvey	February 2024
Washington National Opera	Blue	Jeanine Tesori/Tazewell Thompson	March 2023
Atlanta Opera	The Snowy Day	Joel Thompson/Andrea Davis Pinkney	Cancelled March/April 2023
North Carolina Opera	Porgy & Bess	George Gershwin/Ira Gershwin, DuBose Heyward	April 2023
The Metropolitan Opera	Champion	Terence Blanchard/Michael Cristofer	April/May 2023
Pittsburgh Opera	We Shall Not Be Moved	Daniel Bernard Roumain/Marc Bamuthi Joseph	May 2023
Chicago Opera Theater	The Cook-Off	Shawn E. Okpebholo/Mark Campbell	May 2023
Little Opera Theatre of New York	Highway 1 U.S.A.	William Grant Still/Verna Arvey	May/June 2023
Opera Theatre of Saint Louis	Treemonisha	Scott Joplin	May/June 2023
Cedar Rapids Opera Theatre	Charlie and the Wolf	Dave Ragland/Mary McCallum	June 2023
Des Moines Metro Opera	DWB (Driving While Black)	Susan Kander/Roberta Gumbel	July 2023
New Orleans Opera	Blue	Jeanine Tesori/Tazewell Thompson	November 2023
San Francisco Opera	Omar	Michael Abels, Rhiannon Giddens	November 2023

Company	Production	Composer/Librettist	Date
Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra & Chorale	Dido's Ghost	Errollyn Wallen/Wesley Stace	November 2023
Detroit Opera	X, the life and times of Malcolm X	Anthony Davis/Thulani Davis	November/December 2023

Table 4: Soprano arias from African American Operas

Title	Opera	Composer	Range	Link to Score/Info
Isabella's Aria	Blake	H. Leslie Adams	Eb4-G5	https://www.hleslieadams.com/scores
Miranda's Prayer	Blake	H. Leslie Adams	E4-Cb6	https://www.hleslieadams.com/scores
Miranda's Recitative & Lullaby	Blake	H. Leslie Adams	Eb3-A5	https://www.hleslieadams.com/scores
I am Harriet Tubman	Harriet Tubman	Nkeiru Okoye	A3-D6	https://www.nkeiruokoye.com/shop
I am Moses, the Liberator	Harriet Tubman	Nkeiru Okoye	A3-C6 (optional D6)	https://www.nkeiruokoye.com/shop
My Name is Araminta	Harriet Tubman	Nkeiru Okoye	D4-G5	https://www.nkeiruokoye.com/shop
The Sacred Tree	Treemonisha	Scott Joplin	E4-Ab5	https://imslp.org/wiki/Treemonisha_(Joplin,_Scott)
Lullaby	Frederick Douglass	Dorothy Rudd Moore	N/A	https://composers.com/index.php/composers/dorothy-rudd-moore/lullaby-opera-frederick-douglass-song-version
Calm as the Waters of the Bayou	A Bayou Legend	William Grant Still	N/A	http://www.williamgrantstillmusic.com/AriasDuetsandScenes.htm

Title	Opera	Composer	Range	Link to Score/Info
In Ages Past	A Bayou Legend	William Grant Still	E4-A5	http://www.williamgrantstillmusic.com/AriasDuetsandScenes.htm
Give Me No Body Without Your Soul	Blue Steel	William Grant Still	F4-Db6	http://www.williamgrantstillmusic.com/AriasDuetsandScenes.htm
Golden Days	Costaso	William Grant Still	E4-A5	http://www.williamgrantstillmusic.com/AriasDuetsandScenes.htm
I Have Two Loves	Minette Fontaine	William Grant Still	Eb4-G5	http://www.williamgrantstillmusic.com/AriasDuetsandScenes.htm
This Strange Awakening	MOTA	William Grant Still	G4-A5	http://www.williamgrantstillmusic.com/AriasDuetsandScenes.htm
Tis Sunset in the Garden	Troubled Island	William Grant Still	Eb4-A5 (optional C6)	http://www.williamgrantstillmusic.com/AriasDuetsandScenes.htm

Table 5: Mezzo-soprano/contralto arias from African American Operas

Title	Opera	Composer	Range	Link to Score/Info
Moremi's Lullaby	Vanqui	Leslie Savoy Burrs	Bb3-F5	http://www.leslieburrs.com/store/c2/Digital_Downloads.html
Little Black Slave Child	Troubled Island	William Grant Still	D4-E5	http://www.williamgrantstillmusic.com/AriasDuetsandScenes.htm

Title	Opera	Composer	Range	Link to Score/Info
Now They Will Be Coming to the Tree	A Bayou Legend	William Grant Still	D#4-F#5 (optional A5)	http://www.williamgrantstillmusic.com/AriasDuetsandScenes.htm
Who Can Tell What Fate?	MOTA	William Grant Still	D4-E5	http://www.williamgrantstillmusic.com/AriasDuetsandScenes.htm
Once a Little Child	Highway I, U.S.A.	William Grant Still	D4-F5	http://www.williamgrantstillmusic.com/AriasDuetsandScenes.htm
To Polish and Shine	Troubled Island	William Grant Still	Contralto:	http://www.williamgrantstillmusic.com/AriasDuetsandScenes.htm
Knew You Were Coming	Minette Fontaine	William Grant Still	Contralto	

Table 6: Tenor arias from African American Operas

Title	Opera	Composer	Range	Link to Score/Info
I Come to This Place	Blake	H. Leslie Adams	F3-B4	https://www.hleslieadams.com/scores
My Newfound Friends	Blake	H. Leslie Adams	D3-C5	https://www.hleslieadams.com/scores
Ave Maria	Costaso	William Grant Still	N/A	http://www.williamgrantstillmusic.com/AriasDuetsandScenes.htm
A Wand'ring Beggar Came	Costaso	William Grant Still	Eb3-Bb4	http://www.williamgrantstillmusic.com/AriasDuetsandScenes.htm
What Does He know of Dreams?	Highway 1 U.S.A	William Grant Still	E3-Ab4	http://www.williamgrantstillmusic.com/AriasDuetsandScenes.htm

Title	Opera	Composer	Range	Link to Score/Info
Children of the world	A Bayou Legend	William Grant Still	Eb3-Ab4	http://www.williamgrantstillmusic.com/AriasDuetsandScenes.htm
More Lovely than my Imagining	A Bayou Legend	William Grant Still	Eb3-Ab4	http://www.williamgrantstillmusic.com/AriasDuetsandScenes.htm
Must I die for my Boldness?	MOTA	William Grant Still	G3-Bb4	http://www.williamgrantstillmusic.com/AriasDuetsandScenes.htm
Hear Me, Hear My Plea!	The Pillar	William Grant Still	G3-A4	http://www.williamgrantstillmusic.com/AriasDuetsandScenes.htm
Who Calls	Endymion's Dream	Samuel Coleridge Taylor	Eb3-A#4	https://imslp.org/wiki/Endymion%27s_Dream,_Op.65_(Coleridge-Taylor,_Samuel)

Table 7: Bass/baritone arias from African American Operas

Title	Opera	Composer	Range	Link to Score/Info
Fourth of July Speech	Frederick Douglass	Dorothy Rudd Moore	Baritone	https://composers.com/index.php/composers/dorothy-rudd-moore/fourth-july-speech-opera-frederick-douglass
Why Do Laugh Vival?	Troubled Island	William Grant Still	D3-D4	http://www.williamgrantstillmusic.com/AriasDuetsandScenes.htm
Drums in the Court	Troubled Island	William Grant Still	C#3-E4	http://www.williamgrantstillmusic.com/AriasDuetsandScenes.htm

Title	Opera	Composer	Range	Link to Score/Info
Because Faint Whisperings of Practices	A Bayou Legend	William Grant Still	N/A	http://www.williamgrantstillmusic.com/AriasDuetsandScenes.htm
See the Trees	Blue Steel	William Grant Still	C3-F4	http://www.williamgrantstillmusic.com/AriasDuetsandScenes.htm
I Dream a World	Troubled Island	William Grant Still	F#2-A3	http://www.williamgrantstillmusic.com/AriasDuetsandScenes.htm
A Dream Wasted	Highway I, U.S.A.	William Grant Still	D3-F4	http://www.williamgrantstillmusic.com/AriasDuetsandScenes.htm

Table 8: Late 20th Century-21st Century Black Operas

Name	Composer	Librettist	Date	Brief Synopsis	Link to Score/Info
Omar	Michael Abels & Rhiannon Giddens	Rhiannon Giddens	2022	Drawn from the autobiography of Omar Ibn Said, an enslaved Muslim man who resided in Charleston, South Carolina during the 19th century, this work encapsulates a narrative that sheds light on his lived experiences and challenges.	https://www.subitomusic.com/shop/?yith_wcan=1&product_cat=opera&filter_composer=abels-michael&query_type_composer=or

Name	Composer	Librettist	Date	Brief Synopsis	Link to Score/ Info
Blake	H. Leslie Adams	Daniel Mayers	2021	The opera explores themes of love, separation, and the search for freedom in the Antebellum South. Inspired by a 19th-century novel by Martin Delany, it tells the story of a slave leading their people to liberation. The production aims for inclusive casting, representing multiple ethnic groups.	https://www.blakeopera.org/music-and-score-samples
Soldier Boy, Soldier	T.J. Anderson	Leon Forrest	1982	This narrative revolves around an African American veteran who returns from the Vietnam War, only to encounter escalating violence. Tragically, on his wedding night, he is slain by a jealous lover.	https://composers.com/composers/tj-anderson/soldier-boy-soldier-opera-2-acts
Slip Knot	T.J. Anderson	Yusef Komunyakaa	2001	Arthur, a former slave from Massachusetts, escapes and returns home, only to be sold by his father to another slave owner. Falsely accused of rape, he is imprisoned, tried, and ultimately sentenced to be hanged. Defiantly, he sings of freedom until his last breath.	https://www.subitomusic.com/product/anderson-slip-knot-an-opera-in-two-actsstudy-score-digital-download/
Edmonia	Bill Banfield	Toni Morrison/ Yusef Komunyakaa	2000	This narrative presents the captivating journey of Edmonia Lewis, an indomitable 19th-century sculptor of Black and Native American (Ojibwe) heritage. Against formidable obstacles, she fearlessly forged her artistic identity, leaving an indelible impact on the life and culture of her era and beyond.	https://www.edmoniaopera.com/

Name	Composer	Librettist	Date	Brief Synopsis	Link to Score/ Info
Luyala	Bill Banfield	Penelope Bridgers	2000	The story unfolds in a mythical African realm, where Luyala, the willful daughter of the king, defies the sky spirit and is banished to seek spiritual transformation. Within the depths of the forest, she encounters Muoma, a destitute beggar afflicted by wounds. Despite her initial resistance, Luyala gradually succumbs to love's embrace and finds herself inexorably drawn to Muoma.	https://digitalcommons.colum.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=cmbbr_guides
Champion	Terence Blanchard	Michael Cristofer	2013	Boxer Emile Griffith confronts the tormenting realities of his life: the lasting guilt from a fatal bout in the ring and the inner turmoil surrounding his sexuality.	https://www.tfront.com/p-536339-champion-an-opera-in-jazz-pianovocal-score-in-2-volumes.aspx
Fire Shut up in My Bones	Terence Blanchard	Kasi Lemmons	2019	The opera centers around Charles, a young African-American man navigating poverty. As he matures, he faces the daunting task of grappling with the aftermath of the sexual abuse he experienced at the hands of his cousin.	N/A
Vanqui	Leslie Burrs	John A. Williams	1999	This opera depicts the tale of Vanqui and Prince, two Africans enslaved in America. Tragically torn apart, this couple meets a cruel fate through merciless murder. However, their spirits are resurrected, destined to roam the winds in search of one another and the sacred Baobab tree.	http://www.leslieburrs.com/vanqui.html

Name	Composer	Librettist	Date	Brief Synopsis	Link to Score/ Info
Portrait of a Nude Woman as Cleopatra	Leslie Burrs	Barbara Chase-Riboud	2008	The setting is a timeless gathering place where real and shadowy beings or spirits embody the emotions and thoughts conveyed through the sung texts of Cleopatra, Marc Antony, and the Greek Chorus. The live jazz quartet and chamber ensemble on stage enhance the performance, evoking the sentiments, sensations, and passions suggested by the music.	http://www.leslieburrs.com/portrait-of-a-nude-woman-as-cleopatra.html
Transitions: Sung Stories	Leslie Burrs	Jules Tasca	2009	<i>Transitions: Sung Stories</i> portrays the captivating lives of a diverse ensemble of individuals residing in the Courtland Home retirement facility in Philadelphia. This narrative delves into the residents' religious beliefs, struggles with racial issues, honorable service to their country and community, complex family dynamics, and the challenges faced by the working class.	http://www.leslieburrs.com/transitions-sung-stories.html

Name	Composer	Librettist	Date	Brief Synopsis	Link to Score/ Info
Of the Sea	Ian Cusson	Kanika Ambrose	2023	A father's unwavering love compels him to undertake extraordinary measures to rescue his daughter. "Of the Sea" chronicles the journey of Maduka, his daughter Binyelum, and other Africans who were forced overboard during the Middle Passage. These resilient individuals now inhabit mythical underwater realms that extend across the depths of the ocean floor.	https://www.iancusson.com/works
Amistad	Anthony Davis	Thulani Davis	1997	This opera narrates the remarkable story of enslaved individuals who courageously rebelled against the slave ship Amistad. Their subsequent trial and eventual triumph in an American court of law shed light on the emergence of the African American as a distinct cultural entity.	https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/amistad_act1fs_27225
The Central Park Five	Anthony Davis	Richard Wesley	2019	The opera is based on a distressing incident in 1989 where a woman was raped and assaulted in New York's Central Park. Five African-American and Hispanic teenagers were wrongly convicted, serving years in prison before being exonerated.	https://www.eamdc.com/psny/composers/anthony-davis/works/the-central-park-five-2/

Name	Composer	Librettist	Date	Brief Synopsis	Link to Score/ Info
Lear on the 2nd Floor	Anthony Davis	Allan Havis	2013	The narrative reimagines the renowned tale of King Lear, centering around a female neuroscience researcher afflicted with Alzheimer's disease. This adaptation delves into her intricate connections with her three daughters and her deceased husband Mortimer, who assumes the role of the Fool in this compelling reinterpretation.	https://www.eamdc.com/psny/composers/anthony-davis/works/lear-on-the-2nd-floor/
Tania	Anthony Davis	Michael John La Chiusa	1992	Loosely inspired by the infamous abduction of Patricia Hearst by the Symbionese Liberation Army in 1974, this opera combines dark comedy with a profound exploration of the disintegration of identity and the crumbling of established societal foundations.	https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/tania_27246

Name	Composer	Librettist	Date	Brief Synopsis	Link to Score/ Info
Lilith	Anthony Davis	Allan Havis	2009	The opera <i>Lilith</i> merges biblical times with present-day New York, casting Adam's first wife as the central figure in a clever allegory about marriage and sexual dynamics. Davis's composition fluidly transitions between the ancient myth and a contemporary version of the Adam/Eve/Lilith triangle, featuring Arnold, a lawyer, as Adam, Eppy as Eve, his wife, and Claire as Lilith, an intruder who jeopardizes their marriage and their young son.	https://www.eamdc.com/psny/composers/anthony-davis/works/lilith/
Under the Double Moon	Anthony Davis	Deborah Atherton	1989	<i>Under the Double Moon</i> is a science fiction opera that delves into themes of transformation and personal agency. Taking place in the distant future on the planet Undine, the narrative follows Tarj and Xola, telepathic twins who must navigate the transition from mischievous children to responsible adults faced with consequential decision-making.	https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/27247/Under-the-Double-Moon--Anthony-Davis/

Name	Composer	Librettist	Date	Brief Synopsis	Link to Score/ Info
Wakonda's Dream	Anthony Davis	Yusef Komunyakaa	2007	<i>Wakonda's Dream</i> portrays the struggles of a contemporary Native American family, profoundly impacted by the historical events and groundbreaking 1879 court case in Nebraska which marked a significant milestone as American Indians were officially recognized as "human beings under the law" for the first time in U.S. history. The opera chronicles the journey of Delores (Ponca) and Justin Labelle, along with their son Jason, as they navigate the complexities of their Native American identity in modern society.	https://www.schott-music.com/en/wakonda-s-dream-no447295.html
X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X	Anthony Davis	Thulani Davis	1986	The opera dramatizes the remarkable life of a civil rights icon, prioritizing not the mere explanation or glorification of the subject, but instead highlighting his profound personal evolution. Moreover, it explores the transformative journey of the audience itself and their evolving perceptions of the icon, from perceiving him as a victim of poverty to a leader-agitator, and ultimately, as a martyr.	https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/x_vs_27257

Name	Composer	Librettist	Date	Brief Synopsis	Link to Score/ Info
Lalovavi	Kevin Day	Tifara Brown	2025	Taking place in a futuristic era, the narrative revolves around the expedition of Persephone, the youngest daughter of the Primus of Atlas, once known as the city of Atlanta. In this society, currency and social standing hinge upon the possession of Syndicus, a rare gene that bestows vitality and extended lifespan. However, when Persephone's possession of this gene is discovered, she becomes the victim of familial betrayal and is compelled to embark on a perilous escape to preserve her own life.	https://www.kevindaymusic.com/opera
Joshua's Boots	Adolphus Hailstork	Susan Kander	1999	<i>Joshua's Boots</i> is set in 1878 and explores the untold history of Black Cowboys and the all-black Buffalo Soldiers in the American West. Through extensive research, the opera unveils their crucial role in the country's expansion. With a genuine Western atmosphere, the narrative showcases saloon singers, dancers, cowpokes, and the challenges of life on a dangerous cattle drive, capturing the essence of this captivating era.	https://www.presser.com/114-42001-joshua-27s-boots.html

Name	Composer	Librettist	Date	Brief Synopsis	Link to Score/ Info
Rise for Freedom: The John P. Parker Story	Adolphus Hailstork	David Gonzalez	2007	After buying his freedom, John P. Parker becomes a successful inventor and iron foundry owner in Ohio. However, his focus shifts to a challenging mission as a conductor on the Underground Railroad. He actively opposes a Kentucky slave owner named Sroufe, who seeks to recapture two escaped slaves.	https://www.presser.com/411-41166-rise-for-freedom.html
Paul Laurence Dunbar: Common Ground	Adolphus Hailstork	Herbert Martin/ Paul Laurence Dunbar	1995	"Paul Laurence Dunbar: Common Ground" was originally conceptualized as a theatrepiece. Its primary objective was to offer an impressionistic representation of his work. The composition incorporates thirteen poems, creating a cohesive and evocative artistic experience.	https://www.carlfischer.com/411-41195-paul-laurence-dunbar-3a-common-ground.html
Intelligence	Jake Heggie	Gene Scheer	2023	Amidst the devastating backdrop of the Civil War, it is not the men engaged in battle who wield the most formidable weapon. Rather, it is two women who harness the power of intelligence, an invisible force that holds immeasurable potency. In this tumultuous era, their keen intellect becomes a force to be reckoned with, transcending the confines of gender and race and leaving an indelible impact on the course of history.	https://www.jakeheggie.com/works/intelligence

Name	Composer	Librettist	Date	Brief Synopsis	Link to Score/ Info
She Never Lost a Passenger: Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad	Susan Kander	Susan Kander	1996	The founder of the Philadelphia Vigilant Committee, William Still, receives a coded letter from Abolitionist Thomas Garrett. The letter reveals the progress of "Moses" and her group towards his safe house. Still sings of Harriet Tubman, known as Moses, a courageous woman who guided countless individuals without losing a single passenger along the underground railroad.	http://susankander.net/works/she-never-lost-a-passenger/
Frederick Douglass	Ulysses Simpson Kay	Donald Dorr	1985	This work presents a semi-fictionalized portrayal of Frederick Douglass's final years, highlighting his marriage to his second wife, Helen Pitts Douglass. It delves into the significant moments and experiences that shaped this period of Douglass's life.	https://www.tfront.com/p-473346-frederick-douglass-opera-in-three-acts.aspx
The Knife of Dawn	Hannah Kendall	Tessa McWatt	2016	This work is based on the story of Martin Carter, a Guyanese political activist and poet. It takes place in his prison cell at the end of a hunger strike in 1953. Carter, who was detained without charge, dedicated himself to the fight for liberation from Great Britain.	https://issuu.com/casaricordi/docs/sy_9102-kendall-the_knife_of_dawn-score-a3-wm

Name	Composer	Librettist	Date	Brief Synopsis	Link to Score/ Info
Papa Doc	Dorothy Rudd Moore	Richard Wesley	2013	In Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on November 12, 1964, a massive crowd assembled to witness a public execution. This event took place during the presidency of François "Papa Doc" Duvalier, a dictator who had already been in power for seven years at that time. Papa Doc went on to maintain his authoritarian rule for a total of fifteen years.	https://composers.com/index.php/composers/dorothy-rudd-moore/papa-doc-opera-one-act
Elegies for the Fallen	Joyce Solomon Moorman	Rashidah Ismaili	2005	The opera centers around the Soweto uprising that commenced on June 16, 1976, in Soweto, South Africa. This seismic event unfolded when the South African police opened fire on a group of protesting students, resulting in fatalities. The uprising persisted for a year and a half, leaving an indelible mark on the course of history.	https://www.joycesolomonmoorman.com/
Sanctuary Road	Paul Moravec	Mark Campbell	2023	<i>Sanctuary Road</i> draws inspiration from the writings of William Still, an abolitionist and conductor of the Underground Railroad. This powerful piece delves into the stories of Clarissa Davis and Henry "Box" Brown, among others, who risked everything in their quest for freedom. Their narratives illuminate the courage and sacrifice exhibited by those who sought liberation from slavery.	https://www.subitonusic.com/product/moravec-sanctuary-road-opera-oratorio-for-soli-satb-chorus-orchestra/

Name	Composer	Librettist	Date	Brief Synopsis	Link to Score/ Info
The Running Man	Diedre Murray	Diedre Murray	2000	This piece is situated during World War II and the migration of Southern families to Northern cities. It captures the dynamic culture of the people living along Virginia's Chesapeake Bay from the 1930s to the 1950s.	https://namt.org/musicals/running-man/
Harriet Tubman: When I crossed That Line to Freedom	Nkeiru Okoye	Nkeiru Okoye	2013	This two-act theatrical work portrays the inspiring transformation of a young girl born into slavery into the legendary Harriet Tubman, renowned for her role as a conductor on the Underground Railroad. Based on recent Tubman biographies, the narrative unfolds within the backdrop of Tubman's close-knit family, featuring a colorful cast of characters that bring the story to life.	https://www.nkeiruokoye.com/harriet-tubman-opera
Home of my Ancestors	Nkeiru Okoye	Anita Gonzalez	(In Progress)	Themes: Juneteenth, African American History	https://www.nkeiruokoye.com/theatrical-works
600 Square Feet	Nkeiru Okoye	David Cote	2021	In a tiny apartment, Alexandra and Lance break up but keep living together in separate rooms. Without revealing their motives, they still desire each other's company. Can ex-lovers coexist in 600 square feet without honesty? Find out in this romantic comedy about trust, boundaries, and love in a shared space.	https://www.nkeiruokoye.com/600-square-feet

Name	Composer	Librettist	Date	Brief Synopsis	Link to Score/ Info
A Truth Before Their Eyes	Nkeiru Okoye	Nkeiru Okoye	TBD	Story inspired by current events.	https://www.nkeiruokoye.com/theatrical-works
At the Grande	Nkeiru Okoye	Nkeiru Okoye	(In Progress)	<i>At the Grande</i> is a delightful operatic romantic comedy that offers both humor and warmth while exploring the themes of race relations and gender equality within the corporate landscape of America. Imagine a fusion of "Marriage of Figaro," "The Apprentice," and "Scandal," all harmoniously intertwined with a musical score. This production is inspired by contemporary events and carries a powerful message about the lasting impact of kindness.	https://www.nkeiruokoye.com/at-the-grande
Invitation to a Die-In	Nkeiru Okoye	David Cote	2021	This "sung story" is a musical response to the recent murders of unarmed Black men by police officers or vigilantes. It offers a powerful and thought-provoking reflection through music.	https://www.nkeiruokoye.com/invitation-to-a-die-in
Tales from the Briar Patch	Nkeiru Okoye	Carman Moore	2017	This revamped triptych of short operas is designed to be enjoyable for the whole family, infused with a sense of fun and excitement. It pays homage to the rich African tradition of storytelling that transcends age boundaries, ensuring a captivating experience for audiences of all generations.	https://www.nkeiruokoye.com/tales-from-the-briar-patch

Name	Composer	Librettist	Date	Brief Synopsis	Link to Score/ Info
We've Got Our Eye On You	Nkeiru Okoye	David Cote	2015	<i>We've Got Our Eye on You</i> is a lighthearted and uplifting production that takes cues from Greek mythology, set in ancient times. With a delightful blend of humor reminiscent of Monty Python, the wit of Gilbert & Sullivan, and a touch of Broadway, this theatrical piece delivers a humorous yet meaningful message about the perils of giving in to desire too soon.	https://www.nkeiruokoye.com/weve-got-our-eye-on-you
The Cook-Off	Shawn E. Okpebholo	Mark Campbell	2023	Get ready for another exciting season of "America Loves Food" as Kenny Kincaid returns to host your favorite TV cooking competition. In this one-act opera, three talented contestants - Ivy, Kendra, and Álvaro - compete to create America's favorite comfort food, Mac 'n' Cheese. As the competition unfolds, deep truths about themselves and the connection between food and history in this country are revealed. Get ready for a captivating and revealing culinary journey.	http://www.shawnokpebholo.com/works
Beatrice	Dave Ragland	Mary McCallum	2023	<i>Beatrice</i> is a youth opera that tells the inspiring story of Beatrice Morrow Cannady, a prominent Black leader in Oregon during the early 1900s civil rights movement.	https://daveragland.com/for-opera-companies

Name	Composer	Librettist	Date	Brief Synopsis	Link to Score/ Info
One Vote Won	Dave Ragland	Mary McCallum	2020	On Election Day, Gloria firmly believes that voting is unnecessary, until she crosses paths with two hidden figures from history who befriend her. These civil rights legends embark on a mission to persuade her to make it to the polls in time. Will Gloria be convinced by their compelling arguments and exercise her right to vote?	https://daveragland.com/for-opera-companies
Charlie and the Wolf	Dave Ragland	Mary McCallum	2023	In a comical twist, classical composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker meet and decide to give each other music lessons. The result is a hilarious journey as these musical legends navigate the collision of classical and jazz styles.	https://daveragland.com/for-opera-companies
We Shall Not Be Moved	Daniel Bernard Roumain	Mark Bamuthi Joseph	2017	Five North Philly teens, on the run after a string of tragic incidents, find refuge in an abandoned house in West Philadelphia. Little do they know, this house was once the headquarters of the MOVE organization. The infamous 1985 standoff with the police resulted in the destruction of the neighborhood and the loss of 11 lives, including five children.	https://www.danielroumain.com/scores

Name	Composer	Librettist	Date	Brief Synopsis	Link to Score/ Info
Bulrusher	Nathaniel Stookey	Eisa Davis	2021	This opera tells the poignant coming-of-age tale of an African American girl growing up in the secluded Anderson Valley of Northern California in 1955. Found in a basket by the river, she is raised by the local schoolteacher and has never encountered anyone who shares her appearance. However, everything changes when a young Black woman from Alabama arrives in the town, opening the protagonist's eyes to a world where she finally sees someone who looks like her.	https://www.westedgeopera.org/bulrusher
The Snowy Day	Joel Thompson	Andrea Davis Pinkney	2021	<i>The Snowy Day</i> follows young Peter as he explores his neighborhood on a snowy day, encountering new friends and delightful surprises along the way.	https://www.musicalartists.org/contracts-and-agreements/schedule-c/snowy-day-the/
Mask in the Mirror	Richard O. Thompson	Richard O. Thompson	2020	<i>The Mask in the Mirror</i> is a three-act chamber opera that vividly portrays the courtship and ultimately failed marriage of the renowned African-American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar and novelist Alice Ruth Moore. Through captivating music and storytelling, this opera delves into their complex relationship, offering a compelling exploration of their lives and love.	https://www.richardthompsonpiano.com/mask-recording-project

Name	Composer	Librettist	Date	Brief Synopsis	Link to Score/ Info
The Powder Monkey	Errollyn Wallen	Dominic Hingorani	2018	Born in captivity, Chukwunenye, an African Igbo boy, serves as “the powder monkey” on a slave ship. With his freedom within reach, he faces a crucial decision when a rebellion breaks out among the enslaved during the ship's final voyage. Will he choose his people or his own freedom?	https://www.errollynwallen.com/works
Dido's Ghost	Errollyn Wallen	Wesley Stace	2021	<i>Dido's Ghost</i> is a transformative opera that reimagines and enhances Purcell's masterpiece. In this innovative production, Wallen's drama incorporates a complete performance of Purcell's work, framing it as a flashback within the larger narrative. The opera offers a fresh perspective, shedding new light on the original story and expanding its thematic dimensions.	https://www.errollynwallen.com/works
ANON	Errollyn Wallen	Errollyn Wallen	2013	This captivating production serves as a contemporary response to the timeless Manon story that has inspired numerous operatic works, <i>ANON</i> amplifies the voices of sexually exploited young women. While exploring various narratives, the opera centers around the compelling story of Girl 1, shedding light on her experiences.	https://www.errollynwallen.com/works

Name	Composer	Librettist	Date	Brief Synopsis	Link to Score/Info
The Paradis Files	Errollyn Wallen	Nicola Werenowsk/ Selina Mills	2022	Crafted through a series of workshops involving schoolgirls, students, and sex workers in Birmingham, this opera exudes beauty and tenderness. It fearlessly confronts the harsh realities that some of these women face, refusing to shy away from the brutality of their lives. The result is a powerful and poignant portrayal that captures both the resilience and vulnerability of these individuals.	https://www.errollynwallen.com/works
4	Trevor Weston	Amiri Baraka	2010	This musical drama serves as a heartfelt response to the tragic events that unfolded in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963, where four young girls were killed. It pays tribute to their memory and the profound impact of their untimely deaths.	http://www.trevorweston.com/new-page

Table 9: Duets and Scenes from African American Operas

Title	Opera	Composer	Range/Voices	Link to score/info
O Miranda	Blake	H. Leslie Adams	Soprano: E4-A5 Baritone: C#3-E4	https://www.blakeopera.org/music-and-score-samples
Lullaby	Jocelyn of Benjamin Godard	Dorothy Rudd Moore	2 Sopranos	https://composers.com/index.php/composers/dorothy-rudd-moore/lullaby-opera-jocelyn-benjamin-godard

Title	Opera	Composer	Range/Voices	Link to score/info
The Drums Weave the Spell of Death	Blue Steel	William Grant Still	Soprano Contralto: Baritone:	http:// www.williamgrantst illmusic.com/ AriasDuetsandSce nes.htm
To Polish and Shine	Troubled Island	William Grant Still	Soprano Mezzo-Soprano Contralto	http:// www.williamgrantst illmusic.com/ AriasDuetsandSce nes.htm
Love Duet (I Hear Your Voice)	Blake	H. Leslie Adams	Soprano: Eb4-B6 Tenor: Db3-Bb4	https:// www.blakeopera.or g/music-and- score-samples

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