The Friction and Fluidity of a "Melting Pot" Opera: Reading and Revisiting Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*

"The most contradictory cultural symbol ever created in the Western World," pronounced Harold Cruse in his seminal work, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967).[1] A sweeping, categorical indictment by any measure; yet this verdict today seems logical and precise, as it addresses one of the most problematic, potent, paradoxical, and liminal works in the opera canon: Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. And although Cruse's categorization of this "folk opera" may seem hyperbolic and overreaching, the conviction and consternation behind the sentiment is not surprising, given *Porgy and Bess*'s unique, conflicted position within its genre, as well as the disparate elements foregrounding, informing, and constituting the work.

From its very beginnings, *Porgy and Bess* caused widespread anxiety amongst its readers. Where to place this hybrid? What to call it? Was the work an artistic "mutt" or a more evolved species? When the production (with music by George Gershwin, libretto by DuBose Heyward, and lyrics by Heyward and Ira Gershwin) debuted at Broadway's Alvin Theatre on October 10, 1935, its original director, Rouben Mamoulian, tried to explain the distress of critics who were confounded by *Porgy*'s unorthodox hybridity and its resistance to formulaic classification; he stated: "You give someone something delicious to eat and they complain because they have no name for it."[2] Indeed, this operatic dish was a symbiotic and protean casserole – resisting homogenization and categorization. Furthermore, it mirrored its native site of construction: that is, the "melting pot" of America with its numerous forms and degrees of amalgamation -- as well as the correlative and resultant reception paradigms of conflict, ambiguity, prejudice, contradiction, power, and acquiescence. Today, friction and fluidity persist as active, potent components/qualities of *Porgy and Bess*; and through a contemporary lens, this landmark work can be further illuminated by interrogating and investigating its many complex, obfuscatory facets: 1) "folk" categorization; 2) racial/ethnic context; 3) musical structure/form; 4) formative perceptions and interpretations; 5) performance venue. This article will address these areas and their contributions to the intersubjective, poststructural archetype that is *Porgy and Bess*, exploring the historic tensions,

negotiations, and paradoxes which not only complicate the work but also inform its present-day position within the opera genre.

Before specifically addressing *Porgy and Bess*, however, it is crucial to historicize and contextualize the production, detailing the existent landscape and antecedent works which foregrounded and informed the constitution, construction, performance, and reception of Gershwin's opera. The decade preceding *Porgy* saw a long-overdue emergence of American opera, as American composers were finally "invited" into the repertoires and onto the stages of authoritative, validating opera companies. Heretofore, this arena had been dominated and dictated by European, canonical classics. In this regard, the ultimate venue was (and, in many ways, still is) New York's Metropolitan Opera. And beginning with *The King's Henchmen* in 1927 and *Peter Ibbetson* in 1931, the Met found great success with its first American commissions. Composed by Deems Taylor (1885-1966), both works exemplify the "grand opera" style and very much echo their European counterparts with melodic, lush scores paired with tragic, neoromantic librettos.[3] Significantly, upon their debuts, the American populace rewarded Taylor's "highbrow" works with robust ticket sales; specifically, both *Henchmen* and *Ibbetson* broke box office records to play multiple consecutive Met seasons. As a result, the productions set in motion a new respect for American opera, a respect potently bolstered by tremendous audience appeal and profit, reflective of a high art and commercial/entertainment amalgamation -- a model soon to be engaged by *Porgy*.

As the decade progressed, American composers continued to garner notice in the classical opera arena, as their works ushered in a new era of form/sound/content experimentation, often in an attempt toward "American" novelty and distinction. Most notably, the Met-commissioned *The Emperor Jones* (1933) by Louis Gruenberg (1884-1964) deliberately turned away from the romantic European sound and aesthetic to present a probing American psychological portrait. Based on Eugene O' Neil's play, *Jones* is also a potent predecessor to *Porgy* in regards to race representation, genre fluidity, and American musical modernism. In its original Met incarnation, Gruenberg's atonal, syncopated "neoprimitive" score, replete with *sprechgesang*, drumming, and folk interpolation,[4] afforded its audience an environmental, visceral experience.[5] Importantly, Gruenberg described his score as a true "American sound," underpinned by a

new technique which "combines a knowledge of tradition and the modern experiment."[6] Such a construct/aesthetic confounded and outraged many spectators, however, who had not been alerted beforehand as to *Jones*' subversion of traditional opera norms. In this respect, the work proved to be a prescient exemplar of genre liminality; specifically, as Elise Kirk notes in *American Opera* (2001), after *Jones*' initial ovation, many audience members "wondered what indeed they had seen."[7] Further, one cannot dismiss the racial significance of an opera which centers around an African American (Jones) fleeing his demons (or "Formless Fears"), as he confronts and wrestles his conflicted identity/legacy of "blackness." Paradoxically, however, the Met premiere contained no black performers (Met star Lawrence Tibbett portrayed the eponymous character in blackface), for African Americans had not yet found a place on the legitimate opera stage. Instead, it would be on Broadway that the black performer could authentically present and represent his race in "opera."

This is not to suggest that there had been no attempt at black representation on the opera stage before the '30s, but such efforts were few and far between, with the works often facing insurmountable odds in regards to venue, audience, capital, and critical acceptance. Case in point: Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha* (1911). With an expansive, amalgamative score and a libretto (by Joplin) depicting a black schoolteacher's attempt to vanquish superstition through education, Joplin's work was initially given a modest concert treatment in Harlem in 1915. Although the 1911 published score had been praised in *American Musician and Art Journal*, the concert version received lukewarm reviews; consequently, Joplin could not find an opera company willing to produce *Treemonisha* during his lifetime. The opera establishment, it seemed, had difficulty reconciling the work, not only in terms of race but also in terms of its populist, pedestrian vernacular. As described by opera anthologists Donald Jay Grant and Hermine Weigel Williams, *Treemonisha*'s score is a polyphony of popular American idioms, consisting of "syncopated dance, barbershop quartet, gospel hymns, ragtime, popular ballads, and even a waltz;"[8] further, as conductor Richard Benjamin notes, "His [Joplin's] real dream was to give everyday people the opportunity, perhaps their only one, to experience opera on their own terms in the music halls and neighborhood theaters."[9] Thus, this African-American work would have to wait more than half a century

to take its rightful place on the opera stage; for it wasn't until the 1970s that Joplin's score was rediscovered and *Treemonisha* was finally performed as a full-scale production.[10]

Conversely, a later instance of black "opera" authorship/performance found great success and notoriety upon its initial theatrical run but has now fallen into obscurity. In 1934, African émigré Asadata Dafora directed, choreographed, composed, wrote, and starred in *Kykunkor or the Witch Woman* -- a sung and danced depiction of an African tribal wedding and exorcism. Although the production originated in a small New York studio, it soon moved to Broadway where it became, as noted by Maureen Needham, "one of the top ten theatrical productions of the season."[11] With Dafora's compilation and configuration of North and West African folk music, accompanied by an orchestra of four drummers, the performance was billed as a "Native African Opera." Yet, the "opera" moniker provoked a degree of angst in music, dance, and theatre communities. In a telling parallel, George Gershwin had just begun composing *Porgy* when he attended several performances of *Kykunkor*. Needham posits that "just as with Dafora's work, *Porgy and Bess* was billed as a 'folk opera' when it opened on Broadway" and incited similar tensions in terms of "opera" categorization.[12] Further, given its racial/ethnic constitution, *Kykunkor* fell victim to existing paradigms of essentialism and exoticism, as it was predominantly labeled "ritual" or "folk," as opposed to "opera. " For instance, *New York Times*' John Martin complained that "*Kykunkor* is called an opera, though it is actually more of a ritual drama,"[13] while *New York Sun*'s W. J. Henderson wrote: "This so-called opera is properly to be classed as a folk drama."[14]

Indeed, the early '30s could be seen as a period in which black opera productions were most often framed as "folk" enterprises, perhaps in an effort by cultural authorities and mediators to differentiate such works from contemporary "legitimate" and/or conventional operas. One of the more successful examples of this trend/phenomenon is Hall Johnson's *Run, Little Chillun* (1933). Johnson (1888-1970), a Julliard-trained African American who came to fame as a spiritual composer and choral conductor, specifically asserted the African-American spiritual and its surrounding religious experience as authentic, valid concert/opera material, raising the musical idiom and cultural/ethnic expression to a "high art" standing in the United States.[15] *Run, Little Chillun* is Johnson's only opera; and significantly, the work is

subtitled *A Negro Folk Drama in Four Scenes.* The innovative work explores, in spectacular revivalist fashion, the vast African-American spiritual terrain (both Judeo-Christian and African "voodoo") and, as with other *Porgy* antecedents, premiered on Broadway. Although the "folk" positioning of the work, along with the Broadway venue, often worked to subvert the work's "opera" standing (again, a foreshadowing of *Porgy*), the work, itself, was critically lauded in its time.

Finally, one last predecessor must be addressed when historicizing *Porgy*. Immediately preceding and foreshadowing Gershwin and his African-American opera on Broadway, Virgil Thomson (1896-1984) became the *first* white composer to use an entirely African-American cast for his opera, *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934). With a lean, poetic libretto by Gertrude Stein, the plotless *Four Saints* is an evocative, hymn-like musical montage in praise of Spanish Catholic saints. Like others before it, the work contradicted preconceptions of "opera;" therefore, Thomson had difficulty finding a company to stage his work. After a successful Connecticut performance in 1934, however, the production moved to Broadway and enjoyed a healthy run while establishing a place in the opera canon. Given its racial component, however, *Four Saints* also suggests the loaded paradigm of a Caucasian author possibly exploiting and appropriating African-American culture/performance to achieve his proprietary "opera" vision. Unfortunately, documented remarks by Harvard-educated, classically trained Thomson do not significantly allay such indictments, for when asked about his all-black cast, he defended his choice with a seemingly essentialist and objectifying argument: "Blacks sing so beautifully and they look so beautiful."[16] With the arrival of *Porgy and Bess* one year later -- that is, *another* Broadway opera by *another* Caucasian composer, featuring *another* African-American cast -- such essentialist, racist logic could not help but inform and prejudice reception of Gershwin's production. Such was the terrain onto which *Porgy* emerged; and given its "melting pot" significance, the work was poised to further incite and interrogate the fluid paradigms of race, venue, genre, art, and ethnicity within the American opera arena.

Reception, Fluidity, and the "Melting Pot" Paradigm

In *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (1982), Robert Hans Jauss defines reception theory as a construct and process by which an audience "reads" a work, creating its meaning, with a "specific

disposition [. . .] which can be empirically determined and which precedes the psychological reaction as well as the subjective understanding of the individual reader." Furthermore, this paradigm includes "a horizon of expectations" held by the spectator/reader; and two of the factors on which these expectations are based are "the familiar norms [. . .] of the genre" and its "implicit relationships to familiar works."[17] This definition also portends the potential disconnect and discord that can arise when an unsuspecting audience confronts a specific work which does not meet its expectations in regards to the genre's familiar norms and relative works within the canon. This is not to suggest, however, that the reader steadfastly resists or refuses to interpret/define a confounding work; for above all, the reader desires meaning. Thus, to combat or allay such confusion or consternation, the spectator may attempt to "read" the work as he/she expected to find it, employing strategies to reconcile the liminal or confounding production/performance with the defining norms of a correlative genre. In addition, such an activity is rarely isolated or singular; for "meaning" is also socially and communally imposed upon the work by a collective cultural consciousness. In *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life* (1990), Marvin Carlson defines such a "socially defined" collective as the "community of readers" which "shares common values and determines collectively the norms and conventions according to which individual readings take place." In short, as summated by Carlson, "readings are thus ultimately authenticated not by the text, but by the community."[18]

Throughout history, *Porgy and Bess* has provided the opera canon with a potent archetype, as it represents a ludic, liminal work which playfully stretches and ignores defining or limiting boundaries, providing specific challenges for its "community of readers." Further, this fluid and flexible dynamic was seemingly implemented and exploited from the very onset by its composer, George Gershwin. For instance, Gershwin stated in a 1935 *New York Times* article that he chose DuBose and Dorothy Heyward's novel, *Porgy*, as the opera's source material in order "to write light as well as serious music, [. . .] to include humor as well as tragedy."[19] Gershwin also voiced his intention to organically create a "new form," which he saw arising from the intersubjective interplay, as well as the slight "melding," of disparate ingredients -- all of which would ultimately result in a greater whole:

> I have adapted my method to utilize the drama, the humor, the superstition, the religious fervor, the dancing and the irrepressible high spirits of the race. If, in doing this, I have created a new form, which combines opera with theatre, this new form has come quite naturally out of the material.[20]

But there were also forces beyond Gershwin's control which compounded the poststructural conundrum surrounding and informing his opera. In his 1994 journal article, David Horn explores the formative diversity of *Porgy and Bess*' "community of readers" and the power struggles/discrepancies between the various components (author, content, context, audience) which comprised and shaped the opera. As I have previously stated, any reader, when confronted with an "open" form such as *Porgy*, will fight to reconcile thwarted expectations in order to "make meaning." Accordingly, Horn recounts that the struggles to authoritatively claim and demarcate *Porgy* -- the pushing and pulling, if you will -- resulted in a model of fluid receptivity which he terms "the co-existence (however unstable) of multiple readings."[21] This phenomenon is unavoidable when a work does not represent a concrete, categorical form but is, instead, the site of a multitude of components which are variously and discriminately used to inscribe meaning. The need to delineate and, thereby, constrict the work is further incited by a struggle for power within or among aesthetic, cultural, sociopolitical, racial and/or ethnic arenas. Regarding this potent paradigm, Horn cites theorist Robert Allen, stating that a compelling way to comprehend the tussles and machinations [associations and inscriptions of domination and subordination] at play in any original creative work are rooted in Allen's concept that "the political and social history of America reveals the coalescence and dissipation of multiple sets of interests all along the scale of power in shifting and frequently contradictory patterns of alliance and contestation."[22] Significantly, *Porgy* seemed to be caught in the crosshairs of this "melting pot" conflict. Further, Horn positions the music of George Gershwin, overall, as emblematic of this American "power play" dynamic:

> Gershwin's musical alliances were certainly complex, and we would have to take into account not only their diversity -- Jewish music, Tin Pan Alley, Broadway, African-American traditions, "symphonic" jazz, concert music -- and his changing positioning

towards them, individually and as a group, but the shifting interests, culturally and commercially, which expressed themselves within America at the time.[23]

Indeed, ethnic and racial factors were simultaneously responsible for *Porgy*'s "melting pot" character, as well as its paradigm of fluidity and friction. Critic and scholar John Mason Brown referenced this aspect of *Porgy* when he described the work in 1935 as "the most American opera that has yet been seen or heard: it is a Russian [Mamoulian] who has directed it, two Southerners [DuBose and Dorothy Heyward] who have written its book, two Jewish boys [Ira and George Gershwin] who have composed its lyrics and its music, and a stageful of Negroes who sing and act it to perfection."[24] Specifically, *Porgy*'s original company included classically trained African-American singers in the lead roles, supported by the 20-member African-American concert choir, Eva Jessye Singers. In addition to classical singers, the lead role of Sportin' Life was played by vaudeville star John W. Bubbles. Further contributing to this potent mix, all of the performers were vocally coached by another Russian-American, Alexander Steinert. In *Fascinating Rhythm* (1991), Deena Rosenberg addresses the diverse (and divergent) constitution of the opera, both onstage and off: "For many in the cast, it was the first time that they had played outside their main arenas, whether opera, theater, or vaudeville. *Porgy and Bess* stretched performing artists as it did its writers -- and ultimately its audiences."[25] And the work produced and performed by this mélange similarly resisted and exceeded defining boundaries. In *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess* (1990), Hollis Alpert posits that one could not deny that a "touch of Broadway was in the score [. . .]. And Gershwin himself preferred to call the solo numbers songs rather than arias." He elaborates, however, that "for Gershwin, it was an opera, fashioned and blended from classical sources, spirituals, jazz, blues, and yes, Broadway."[26]

A "Folk" Conundrum -- When Labels Subvert Strictures

When addressing the contradictions and complexities inherent in *Porgy and Bess*, one must also look to the power of discourse – how something is defined, the moniker that situates the work, and the implications of such linguistic strategies. The "folk" subtitling of *Porgy* has haunted the work from its inception; further, the term "folk" (or rather, the term's application and redefinition/distortion by *Porgy*'s

authors) is a significant contributor to tensions and ambiguities surrounding and foregrounding the opera. Writing in 1933, Gershwin stated: "This [folk music] is the strongest source of musical fecundity. [. . .] The best music being written today is music which comes from folk-sources." He then listed "jazz, ragtime, Negro spirituals and blues, southern mountain songs, country fiddling, and cowboy songs" as folk styles that "can be employed in the creation of American art-music."[27] In "An American Folk Opera? Triangulating Folkness, Blackness, and Americaness in Gershwin and Heyward's *Porgy and Bess*" (2004), Ray Allen asserts that Gershwin's new emphasis on folk (over jazz) during this period was "a component of a larger strategy to build his reputation as a bona fide composer of serious art music." Allen continues:

> Gershwin was going back to the future, aligning himself with the great tradition of such nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European composers as Stravinsky, Bartok, Sibelius, and Dvorak, who used elements of native folk materials in many of their most successful works, and the operas of Bizet (*Carmen*), Mussorgsky (*Boris Godunov*), and Puccini (*Madame Butterfly*), which evoked folk idioms and exotic imagery.[28]

Given this argument, it appears that the "serious, bona fide composer" Gershwin attempted to inscribe a significant musical lineage and legitimacy onto his new work by giving *Porgy* the subtitle "folk opera." There are conflicting reports regarding his actions, however. According to Alpert, Gershwin's subtitle was a result of commercial pressure -- a concession to the "musical theatre" market. Specifically, Alpert reports that "the managers of the [Theatre] Guild were worried about excessive use of the word 'opera' out of fear that it would scare off Broadway audiences." He further relays an account by Dorothy Heyward, wife of librettist DuBose Heyward (as well as co-author of the opera's source play, *Porgy*), in which she asserts "that Gershwin fought the Guild on this point, finally agreeing to a compromise: 'folk opera.' Even then, [. . .] he wasn't entirely happy about it."[29]

Yet, offering another version of Allen's "serious art" argument, David Monod writes in "Disguise, Containment and the *Porgy and Bess* Revival of 1952-1956" (2001) that the "folk" labeling was very much attributable to pressures and prejudices within the concert music arena, as well as

Gershwin's sensitivity to the reception (or accreditation) of his work by serious music critics. Indeed, a subjectively imposed and reinscribed high-art/low-art binary and consequent bias was alive and well in America at the time of *Porgy and Bess*' debut -- that is, a systemic paradigm rooted in the notion that a popular art form, such as American musical theatre, constitutes "entertainment" and, therefore, represents a lesser/lower art; while opera (especially European, canonical "classics") constitutes high "Art." Here, I must stress that such designations and benchmarks were, and continue to be, an arbitrary, prejudicial system and strategy put in place and reinforced by a select community of authoritative, meditative voices within the arts. Thus, Monod posits that, as a result of such biases and strictures, there existed anxiety and tension within the critical, authoritative music community over "the notion that this halfway opera [*Porgy and Bess*] by a composer of Broadway entertainments should be considered the equal of the European masterworks." Monod elaborates:

> The critics therefore back-handed their praise of the score, acknowledging the loveliness of much of the music even as they disputed its status as an opera. Ten days after the work's opening in New York, Gershwin apparently gave way and began calling *Porgy* a "new form," a "folk opera." [. . .] The idea that *Porgy* was a "folk opera" stuck.[30]

Ironically, the very strategy Gershwin believed might gain him concert legitimacy -- or at least garner qualified acceptance -- also subjected him to accusations of inauthenticity and undermined his work's "opera" status. Specifically, lines became significantly blurred between the actual production and its defining, germinative origins when Gershwin, while defending his decision "against the use of original folk material," tried to explain his process and application of the term "folk," recounting: "I wanted the music to be all of one piece. Therefore, I wrote my own spirituals and folk songs. But they are still folk music, and therefore, being in operatic form, *Porgy and Bess* becomes a folk opera."[31]

Instead of alleviating the confusion, however, his argument seemingly exacerbated it while also suggesting a dangerous pattern of racial, elitist re-presentation and appropriation. The very constitution of folk-art lies in the authenticity and, in a sense, organic ingenuousness of the community from which the art is born. In other words, folk-art is created/practiced by members of a particular community; it is

derived from and representative of a naive, communal/populist consciousness and mode of expression. Further, any example of "folk" reclamation and representation in the United States would seemingly counter opera, as folk-art was commonly relegated to the "low" end of the American "high art/low art" spectrum (if positioned in the spectrum at all). So how did Gershwin re-present and then use the "folk" paradigm to garner "serious art" merit for his operatic endeavor? Fortunately, he was writing *Porgy and Bess* at a time when folk-works in America (including those by formerly mentioned artists such as Hall Johnson) had become part of a cultural project of artistic (that is, "high art") excavation, exploration, and experimentation (as well as appropriation). In this regard, Allen points to writings such as Alain Locke's *The New Negro* which, in 1925, "encouraged composers to transform folk spirituals into staged art songs and extended concert works in order to create new hybrid genres that simultaneously embraced African American tradition and European modernity." Allen further notes that Gershwin saw himself working in this vein, for "implicit in his [folk] argument" is the suggestion that "he could both write black folk songs and incorporate them into the more *serious* operatic form."[32]

This loaded assumption would be debated by critics and scholars throughout the 20th century; further, Gershwin's confounding of the "folk" term and construct/aesthetic resulted in an initial resistance to and marginalization of *Porgy and Bess* by those who needed a concrete term/concept by which to address and analyze the work. And, in a nation historically plagued by racial anxiety and conflict, *Porgy* may have also incited tension and consternation amongst its readers. Specifically, the work resisted and subverted previously imposed cultural and racial strictures due to the score's positioning of "African-American" music as "folk" music, as well as its overall "folk" designation being applied to the African-American community of Catfish Row. Allen writes, "By equating African American culture with an essential American folkness, Gershwin was aligning himself with those [. . .] who contended that America's most profound indigenous expressions were the creations of her African slaves and their descendents."[33] At the time of *Porgy*'s debut, such a suggestion could not have sat well with all audience members. Yet, there were those who seemingly agreed with Gershwin and deemed his venture successful, accepting and applauding the new "folk" form. In 1935, Danton Walker praised *Porgy* in the

Sunday Daily News as "an opera which musically is in the American idiom, lyrically in the American vernacular, and the perfect expression of a folk tale of the American soil."[34] Concurrently, Marcia Davenport, writing for *Stage* in 1935, proclaimed that Gershwin's score for *Porgy and Bess* "abounds in color, it retrains the quality of the Negro chant, the spiritual, the wail, the jazz, and the blues. It is derivative only so far as it should be derivative for authenticity. It is a folk opera in suggestions of native tunes."[35] Davenport's commendation, however, could also be viewed as a negative indictment of the Gershwin "folk" project; for the complexity and contradiction inherent in her suggestion of "derivative authenticity" (what?) is emblematic of Gershwin's overall challenge and dilemma in positioning *Porgy*, along with its African-American constitution/connotation, as folk-art. Allen poses the problem as follows: "Were such endeavors by white creators truly noble efforts to elevate the art of black folk music to the prestigious concert stage or simply neominstrel practices (this time minus the blackface) aimed at commodifying black otherness for consumption by white audiences?"[36] This crucial question will be explored in more detail in the next section.

Race/Ethnicity -- Reading *Porgy and Bess* thru the Obfuscatory Lens of American Prejudice

In the 1920s, the Harlem Renaissance saw a development by which the Negro spiritual was presented on the concert stage by classically trained black singers (e.g., Roland Hayes, Paul Robeson, and Marion Anderson). In addition, black professional choruses were flourishing in the New York concert scene, with one of the leading choruses of the period being the Eva Jessye Choir (this group was later hired by Gershwin as the "chorus" of *Porgy*). This is not to say, however, that African Americans were neither marginalized nor stigmatized in the "legitimate" music arenas of America. Furthermore, American Jews faced similar prejudices and barriers, with a somewhat unique connection to the African-American community; for Jewish musicians were often censoriously accused of utilizing and commodifying "African-American" music forms such as jazz and the blues. For example, in 1934's *Music Ho! -- a Study of Music in Decline*, Constant Lambert specifically decried Gershwin and the "Jewish element in jazz:"

> Although the Jews have stolen the Negroes' thunder, although Al Jolson's nauseating blubbering masquerades as savage lamenting, although Tin Pan Alley has become a commercialized Wailing Wall, the only jazz music of technical importance is that small section of it that is genuinely Negroid. The blues have a certain austerity that places them far above the sweet nothings of George Gershwin.[37]

Lambert was not alone in his anti-Semitic (and racist) rants; nor was he without precedent. During the 1920s, such reciprocally racist and anti-Semitic sentiments were printed repeatedly in Henry Ford's *The Dearborn Independent*. Regarding jazz and its African-American/Jewish constitution, one anonymous article referred to "the entrance of the [African] jungle motif [. . .] which swiftly degenerated into a rather more bestial type than the beasts themselves arrive at." After blaming Jews for spreading this "monkey talk" while providing just the right "touch of cleverness to camouflage the moral filth," the article ultimately declared: "Popular music is a Jewish monopoly. [. . .] Money and not merit dominates the spread of this moronic music which is styled Jewish, jazz and swing."[38] Although contemporary Gershwin biographer Joan Peyser qualifies such extremist views, reporting that "*The Dearborn Independent* served as a touchstone of extreme anti-Semitic opinion during the 1920s," she also contextualizes and historicizes a systemic paradigm of racial/ethnic venom during this period, noting that *Dearborn*'s "analysis of the Jewish relationship to jazz differs in its viciousness, but not in character, from the spectrum of opinions expressed elsewhere."[39]

Thus, when *Porgy and Bess* premiered in 1935, echoes of the above-cited sentiments, albeit not as overt or acute, somewhat permeated and informed initial responses to the opera. Most telling is the 1935 review by America's most prominent music critic at the time (and aforementioned composer of *Porgy* rival/antecedent *Four Saints*), Virgil Thomson, in *Modern Music*:

> Gershwin does not even know what an opera is. At best it [*Porgy*] is a piquant but highly unsavory stirring-up together of Israel, Africa, and the Gaelic Isles. His lack of understanding of all the major problems of form, of continuity, and of serious or direct musical expression is not surprising in view of the impurity of his sources. [. . .] I do not

like fake folklore, nor fidgety accompaniments, nor bittersweet harmony, nor six-part choruses, nor *gefilte* fish orchestration.[40]

It is somewhat difficult to decipher what Thomson actually meant by the term "impurity;" but there is little ambiguity to his derogative deployment of the term "*gefilte*" and, resultantly, the critique's overall anti-Semitic flavor. (*Gefilte* fish is a traditional Jewish recipe; the word is Yiddish for "stuffed.") In *George Gershwin* (1998), biographer Rodney Greenberg writes that although "subsequent printed versions of Thomson's review changed the phrase to 'plum-pudding' orchestration," the critic "presumably felt better for getting this anti-Semitic swipe out of his system."[41]

Along with ethnic friction, race has consistently proven to be a major point of contention and negotiation for *Porgy*. The opera was authored and composed by Caucasians; there were only two African-Americans on the original Theatre Guild production team: Rosamond Johnson (assistant musical coach) and Eva Jessye (chorus director). Adding insult to what many considered a racial-stereotyping injury, the mostly black cast portrayed characters often interpreted, as stated in a 1952 *Pittsburgh Courier* review, as "depraved [. . .] murderers, illiterates, sycophants, prostitutes, dope addicts, and degenerates [. . .]. The roles are disgraceful and demoralizing."[42] But more troublesome than the content of the opera for many African-American critics and scholars was its authorship/composition by men who could be seen as commodifying race interlopers. For instance, African-American composer (notably, of the aforementioned opera *Run, Little Chillun*), conductor, and critic Hall Johnson, writing for *Opportunity* in 1936, criticized the opera for its lack of "authentic Negro musical language," stating that *Porgy* was "not a Negro opera by Gershwin, but Gershwin's idea of what a Negro opera should be."[43] Johnson also offered a poetic metaphor for the racial/aesthetic danger and deception inherent in the *Porgy* archetype:

> Our [African-American] folk-culture is like the growth of some hardy, yet exotic, shrub, whose fragrance never fails to delight discriminating nostrils, even when there is no interest in the depths of its roots. But when the leaves are gathered by strange hands, they soon wither, and when cuttings are transplanted into strange soil, they have but a short and sickly life. Only those who sowed the seed may know the secret at the root.[44]

Duke Ellington, who admitted to enjoying *Porgy*'s music, nevertheless loudly condemned the overall work for being "black on stage, white everywhere else." Ellington[45] declared that the time had come to "debunk Gershwin's lampblack [minstrel] Negroisms. No Negro could be fooled by *Porgy and Bess*."[46]

Interestingly, the debate rages on as race continues to "color" the opera's reception and interpretation. In 1986, Trevor Nunn directed a significant and visionary revival of *Porgy and Bess*[47] in England at the Glyndebourne Festival Opera which was widely acclaimed. Seemingly, his interpretation asserted a relativist, positive, and progressive view of *Porgy*'s world, with a life-affirming, celebratory pictorial of the African-American culture and a depiction of its characters as victors, rather than victims, living and enduring according to rules relative to their circumstances. In *The Spectator*, critic Sheridan Morley described the production as follows: "Instead of a faintly patronizing white trip down South, it becomes a soaring affirmation of the life of Catfish Row and its potential for survival against all odds."[48] Regardless of such attempts to counter the negative race stereotyping somewhat inherent in *Porgy*, however, there are still those who decry the opera. Specifically, some scholars and artists continue to hold positions similar to those held by Cruse, who demanded in his writings that the disingenuous and damaging work be "forever banned" by black performers.[49] Yet, in a striking anecdote, contemporary Met singer Roberta Alexander illustrates why the racial context/content of *Porgy* (with its associated tensions, significations, and complications) may be one of the most vital and distinguishing aspects of the opera:

> In other operas, there are technically no color lines. [In *Cosi Fan Tutte*], we know the two people singing Fiordiligi and Dorabella are not really sisters, and they're not really from Naples. [. . .] A long time ago, I saw a [*Porgy and Bess*] production in Holland with an all-white cast. The music still worked but [. . .] it's such a part of black American culture -- to take it out of its context seems kind of missing the point.[50]

Thus, for better or for worse, *Porgy* does not blur color lines but is, instead, defined by them. And as the work has moved into the 21st century, it continues to incite discussion and introspection as to

racial authority, authenticity, and inclusion within the opera genre. In 1995, journalist Rosalyn Story cited a current revival by Houston Grand Opera as the first *Porgy* by a major U.S. opera house to be staged by an African-American director (Hope Clarke). Even more important, Story offered insight into a systemic paradigm of racial inequality that cannot help but continue to inform and obfuscate the power and potential of contemporary productions of *Porgy and Bess*:

> The modern philosophy of ethnic inclusion does not extend beyond the singers' rosters of American opera companies. Except for African-American vocalists, [. . .] African Americans who might lend their talents to their aspects of production such as conducting, directing, costume and set design are rarely, if ever, sought out.[51]

Mediating a Musical "Melting Pot:" Operatic Inscription through Form and Structure

Another significant element of fluidity (and the inherent tensions incited by any such indeterminate paradigm) can be found in the persistent confusion and argument, reception-wise, over the genre placement of *Porgy and Bess*. Again, it is important to note that receptivity is a productive activity -- not a static paradigm of consumption. Thus, as Carlson notes, audience members must be provided "with strategies for organizing and interpreting their involvement with the theatre event;"[52] for each audience "brings to the theatre [. . .] expectations, assumptions, and strategies which will creatively interact with the stimuli" of said event.[53] Further, he posits that audiences want and need a certain degree of familiarity with the "rules of the game" when determining meaning; and genre organization is a particular mechanism which facilitates this activity. Carlson explains that throughout much of the history of Western art, "a strong conservatism in subject matter and genre organization has provided spectators with highly predictable psychic models" to apply when reading new works (or revivals). In short, audiences have always been "more comfortable" with creative works they could "experience in generally predictable ways."[54]

This paradigm of comfort and familiarity proved to be problematic in regards to *Porgy and Bess*, especially given its amalgamated nature. Is the work truly an "opera," or does it more accurately constitute "musical theatre?" The long-debated question is exacerbated by the hybridity of the work's

musical structure and form -- a facet which suggests a “melting pot” of classical/concert and popular/musical theatre composition, reflecting Gershwin’s own conflicted and ambivalent movement between the two spheres. Peyser notes that during Gershwin’s lifetime, his place within the concert realm was often challenged and dismissed by authoritative, mediative music critics and academics; for example, in *Modern Music* (published from 1924 to 1945), “Gershwin's name rarely appeared, and when it did, it was in a pejorative context.”[55] Furthermore, William H. Youngren writes in “Serious George” (1990) that academic composers such as Daniel Gregory Mason at Columbia University and Edward Burlingham Hill at Harvard viewed Gershwin’s “successful bid for recognition as a composer of extended concert works” as a “serious affront" to their own.[56] It was within this wary, antagonistic environment that Gershwin composed *Porgy* as an operatic bid for musical “high art” legitimacy, while merging formal and experimental technique with a popular, theatrical sensibility. In 1998, Paul Thomason posited in *Opera News*: “One almost wonders whether *Porgy* would be taken more seriously as an opera if it did not have so many hit tunes.”[57] Thomason’s contemporary opinion reiterates a lament voiced by many of Gershwin's colleagues and original supporters, to whom he replied, “Songs are entirely within the operatic tradition. [. . .] Nearly all of Verdi's operas contain what are known as 'song hits.' *Carmen* is almost a collection of song hits.”[58]

In addition to penning “hummable” tunes, Gershwin also emulated the work of Verdi (and other classical opera composers) by integrating the songs into a continuous, virtuosic score -- one that most musicians agree is operatic. Gregg Baker recounts his own experience of singing Crown in a Metropolitan Opera production of *Porgy*: "It's difficult because there are elements of Verdi and Wagner in the music, along with popular elements. The hurricane scene [. . .] is heavily orchestrated, the tessitura is high, and it requires a tone that's almost Verdian."[59] Roberta Alexander, who has performed Bess at the Met, also claims, "*Porgy*'s definitely an opera. Anybody who has ever sung it will tell you that."[60] Indeed, Gershwin had always envisioned *Porgy* as an opera, positing in 1934 that, if successful, his finished product would "resemble a combination of the drama and romance of *Carmen* and the beauty of *Meistersinger*."[61]

Verdi, Wagner, and Bizet aside, musicologists and critics not only cite classical-cum-popular music amalgamation as one of the defining elements of Gershwin's work but also point to his music's reflexive, ethnic character; for Gershwin often utilized, exploited, and integrated the keys, modulations, and tonalities found in traditional Jewish music. Yet, Greenberg, while giving a bit of credence to what may be deemed an ethnically essentialist conceit (given Gershwin's Jewish lineage), ultimately finds this assumption somewhat wanting. Specifically, he analyzes the song "Ain't Necessarily So" (often declared the most "Jewish" melody in *Porgy*) and claims that advocates of the "Jewish music" theory are "hearing only what they want to hear." In this argument, Greenberg specifically addresses the "blue note" of Gershwin -- that is, the "rocking interval of a minor third" which has often been denoted as the signpost of Gershwin's musical construction and tonality. He elucidates that the blue note is "a constituent of *both black and cantorial* music;" thus, the note fittingly "lies at the heart of a Negro opera by a Jewish composer."[62] Returning to "Ain't Necessarily So," Greenberg closes his argument as follows:

> The rocking interval [. . .] -- sung six times to the syllables "Li'ble to read in de Bible it ain't nece . . ." -- is the most insistent chanting of blue notes anywhere in Gershwin. [. . .] But to be really Jewish, the song would need a sprinkling of augmented 2nds, which cast their Hebraic spell if one sounds the notes E, D flat, C a few times (E to D flat being the augmented 2nd). Augmented 2nds, a life-force of synagogue cantilation and Yiddish folk-songs, are nowhere to be found in Gershwin's hit songs.[63]

Thus, Greenberg suggests that the famous blue note -- the crux of much of Gershwin's signature sound -- is another example of his amalgamative process (black and Jewish), not an exclusive or essentialist element in his compositions. Other examples of synthesis within *Porgy and Bess* follow more classical models, however, as Gershwin aspired to formal opera techniques in the structuring and unifying of his material. In a jazz- and opera-inspired prologue, *Porgy* opens with a piano/dancehall scene in which a jazz pianist (Jasbo Brown in the original production) introduces significant musical and dramatic themes which are later expounded throughout the opera.[64] Rosenberg details this compositional strategy as follows:

> The music to the "We'll go struttin" section of "There's a Boat Dat's Leavin' Soon for New York" is first heard in "Jasbo Brown Blues." This is New York, the North that we are hearing. The harmonies are at once dissonant, provocative, and hypnotic. They also imply a complex and uncontrollable influence from an outside world. [. . .] Then, the jazz pianist gives way to Porgy [. . .]. The notes sung against Jasbo's final chords by those dancing to his music are the same as Porgy's motif.[65]

In accordance with operatic tradition, numerous musical leitmotifs are introduced and repeated throughout *Porgy* -- all of which are associated with characters, situations, and/or thematic ideas.[66] Many are symphonically developed and contextual, not only used to underscore characters but also to illuminate relationships and dramatic situations. Specifically, Rosenberg notes that the drug dealer Sportin' Life's motif consists of a musical figure which is identical to the beginning of his signature song, "It Ain't Necessarily So," while also being a "soured version of Porgy's."[67] The Porgy reference is especially significant, for Porgy's motif is not only associated with his character but is also a building block and counterpoint for other characters and themes. Following is Rosenberg's detailed analysis of this motif which she describes as an "open downward fifth over a major chord followed immediately by a falling (blue) minor third, crushed further by a jarring grace note:"

> The almost simultaneous major and minor, the crushed note, the wailing sound of the minor third, the majesty of the fifth descending [. . .] are all part of Porgy and his world. [. . .] George played with the motif, wrote extensions of it, reversed it, turned it on its head -- these inversions and permutations appear throughout the opera. One single short motif is at once Porgy's theme, played whenever he is on stage, and also resonates continuously throughout the opera in the motifs and then the songs associated with the other major characters [. . .] to point up character relationships.[68]

Indeed, throughout *Porgy*, motive structures and relationships often underscore corresponding dramatic relationships and ideas. As noted in Rosenberg's analysis of "Bess, You Is My Woman, Now," the melody begins on the tonic but soon stresses a blue note on "woman," accenting "the minor third that

is both the crushed part of Porgy's motif and also the most prominent part of Crown's."[69] Even a "noncharacter" receives motive treatment in Gershwin's score; for example, cocaine and its associative idea of outside influence and corruptive modern forces has "its own musical motif, a high-pitched, descending half-step line."[70] Interestingly, however, Bess does not have a signature motif; for Greenberg writes that she is a "confused lady. Her happiness and [. . .] value of herself is dependent on whom she is with. So her music is structured according to her encounters with the three men in her life -- Porgy, Crown, and Sporting Life."[71]

In addition to leitmotifs, another critical -- and highly controversial -- "opera" component of *Porgy* is its recitative (as well as Gershwin's insistence on the crucial, "operatic" necessity of the device). In 1933, Heyward wrote the following in a letter to Gershwin: "I feel more and more that all dialogue should be spoken. This will give the opera speed and tempo. This will give you a chance to develop a new treatment."[72] Nonetheless, Gershwin rejected this suggestion, favoring and implementing continuous recitative for all the major characters. He developed, what Rosenberg terms, "a distinctive blue recitative" to be sung against motifs and song fragments played by the orchestra.[73] Biographer Isaac Goldberg writes that Gershwin also succeeded at realizing a type of "speech melody" (reminiscent of Richard Wagner's *sprechtgesang* and Alban Berg's *sprechstimme*):

> There is an excellent, if unpretentious, example of his [Gershwin's] success in a few words spoken by Frazer [the black lawyer] during the scene of the "divorce" [. . .]: "One yeah? . . . Five yeah? . . . Ten yeah?" This is genuinely humorous, not merely because the bassoon mimics Frazer's delightfully uncertain skip of a seventh, but because the interval is the very music of Frazer's speech.[74]

In its initial reception, Gershwin's recitative garnered harsh criticism -- even by those who praised the opera overall. Much of the recitative was consequently cut in early revivals, only to be restored in the 1970s. More details regarding these developments will be addressed later in this article.

Lastly, when addressing the musical "fluidity" of *Porgy and Bess*, one must cite the serious, innovative compositional techniques employed by Gershwin which often move the score beyond

confining boundaries of musical theatre, jazz, or "folk." In 1935, Gershwin wrote, "I have used sustained symphonic music to unify entire scenes, and I prepared myself for that task by further study in counterpoint and modern harmony."[75] Accordingly, both the opening crap game and the murder scene in *Porgy and Bess* are composed in fugal form.[76] In 1991, composer Elie Siegmeister specifically addressed and assessed the "murder" fugue: "I found it to be a very respectable, traditional fugue -- with jazz subject and counterpoint -- fully developed. [. . .] I can think of no other full-fledged fugues in opera except the one in *Falstaff* -- and Gershwin's is, I think, far more dramatic."[77] Further, as well as looking to opera masters of the past, Gershwin seemingly looked to the future as he joined fellow American composer Gruenberg (*Emperor Jones*) in musical experimentation, including references to twelve-tone composition, bitonality, and other *avant-garde* techniques. Peyser writes: "They [twelve-tone composers] would probably concede the presence of a dense, chromatic, atonal idiom in parts of this score. [. . .] Near the end of Sportin' Life's music, Gershwin uses a D-major chord over an A-flat-major chord, in other words, a simultaneous presentation of two different key centers."[78] Scholars also cite *Porgy*'s "Six Prayer" section, during the storm scene, as further evidence of Gershwin's innovative and serious pushing of compositional boundaries. In it, the scene (Scene 4, Act II) opens with six prayers, freely sung contrapuntally over a consistent bass line -- each notated with its own melody and text. Here, Gershwin instructed that the vocal lines be sung "ad libitum." Peyser states that the impression of "three women and three men, each singing over the group's humming during the prayer [. . .] anticipated by almost twenty years the idea behind the 'chance' music of composer John Cage."[79]

Importantly, *Porgy*'s "Six Prayer" section was never performed on stage until the Houston Grand Opera performed a restored "full-score" version of the opera in 1976 -- a situation which leads to another point of contention/confusion in regards to *Porgy*'s genre categorization. Specifically, the many alterations made to early renditions of *Porgy and Bess* have led to much argument over the original production's legitimacy as opera, as opposed to musical theatre. A great deal of the myth and tension surrounding *Porgy* consists of debates over whether the original cutting of the opera mutated the form into a musical theatre product and to what extent Gershwin, as a pragmatic Broadway composer, was

facilitative and/or complicit in this process. Indeed, director Mamoulian stated in 1938 that Gershwin "never hesitated to make any cuts that were necessary. [. . .] George was one of the best showmen I have ever known. He knew the theatre, he knew the audience."[80] Thus, some of the most sophisticated operatic sections were eliminated before *Porgy*'s Theatre Guild premiere on Broadway. I have already addressed "Jasbo Brown Blues," i.e., the "prologue" scene which introduces a thematic foundation for the opera. According to numerous biographers, when Gershwin was told that this musical segment, which called for different scenery, would need to be cut due to budget restrictions, Gershwin didn't object. "Okay," he said, "that means we start with the lullaby ["Summertime"], and that's some lullaby."[81] In addition, after extensive cutting, only 20 measures of the aleatoric "Six Prayer" section remained in the original production; this snippet was underscored by the orchestra -- along with shrieks, yells, and stage lightening -- to create a dramatic climax at the end of the storm scene. Gershwin was also instrumental in the elimination of another pivotal aria in the original score: "Buzzard Song." Todd Duncan, the original Porgy, did not have an understudy; thus, Gershwin reportedly justified cutting the song by stating, "If we don't, you won't have a Porgy by the time we reach New York. No one can sing that much eight performances a week."[82] British musicologist Wilfrid Mellers considers the elimination of this material to be a serious compositional and dramatic mistake, elaborating:

> It ["Buzzard Song"] is the turning point of the opera. The anguished appogiaturas, the strained gawky leaps and flapping winged chromatics are darker in character than any music we have heard previously, since the anguish is now that of personal experience – [. . .] Porgy's realization of the significance of his love. And although conflict is manifest in the rondo structure, the song turns into a victory for love/life over death.[83]

Originally produced by Theatre Guild, *Porgy and Bess* debuted in front of a select Carnegie Hall audience in 1935, followed by an "out-of town" tryout in Boston. When the opera officially opened at Alvin Theatre in New York that same year, the score was approximately 45 minutes shorter. Yet, musicologist Charles Hamm insists that “none” of the cuts or changes made to the Guild production “had the effect of making *Porgy and Bess* more like a Broadway musical comedy than an opera. Most cuts

eliminated set numbers -- songs or choruses -- or sections thereof, not recitative or ensemble scenes." Hamm concludes that "Gershwin's 'folk opera' was as much an opera when it opened in New York as when he conceived it, although somewhat shorter."[84]

Accordingly, Peyser posits that there are those, such as Hamm, who refute the idea that "Gershwin would have preferred his opera to be performed in its entirety as it is done today," asserting that this notion is a myth. Yet, Peyser counters: "What Hamm does not take into consideration is Gershwin's temperament and personality. Gershwin wanted, above all, to avoid confrontation. Therefore, he allowed himself to be pushed into making changes that he probably wouldn't have made on his own."[85] Mitch Miller (a member of the original orchestra) recounts, "When the cuts were made, the musicians all agreed they had taken the balls out of the show."[86] One might also refer to Gershwin's notation in the full score in Yale University's Beinecke Library which seemingly indicates that this version -- sans cuts -- most fully represents his intended operatic vision. He writes, "This is the Original Unabridged Version of *Porgy and Bess*. Due to time limitations in the theatre, the actual playing version has several deletions."[87] Indeed, once this entire score was recorded in 1975 by Lorin Maazel, most critics concurred with Peter G. Davis of *New York Times*. Davis applauded the work as an opera, "technical and expressive in scope; as in the operas of Mozart and Verdi, nearly every element fuses to produce a fully realized, balanced, musical-dramatic entity."[88]

Original Reception/Perception -- Acclaim Tempered by Confusion and Consternation

Although, by 1975, critical consensus seemed to support Davis' position that *Porgy and Bess* should be considered an opera (albeit, a unique, hybrid version), this was not always the case. When *Porgy* opened in 1935, confusion over the fluid nature of the work manifested itself in contentious and contradictory reviews. As I have previously asserted, a significant, driving aspect of any reception paradigm is the consternation that may arise when communities become consciously aware that their readings are fluid and contradictory. Even more disconcerting is the possibility that the work, itself, is fluid and simply defies concrete definition. Thus, to remedy the situation, readers turn to critical and scholarly reviewers, i.e., the "interpretative communities" who define, analyze, and adjudicate

productions. These voices become especially forceful and facilitative when a significant schism exists between the actual stage event and the "horizon of expectations" brought to the theatre by its audience. In this potential crisis, the critical or scholarly reviewer often bridges the gap by controlling or mediating spectator observation and expectation toward a common interpretation provided by the reviewer. To this end, Carlson posits that reviewers not only "mediate between performance and spectator, suggesting to the latter possible strategies and mechanisms to be employed in reading performances," but that they also "influence reading to such an important extent as to outweigh or even to negate the reading guides of the performance itself."[89] In this model, reviewers provide "judgements on productions," while also providing "intertextual connections, suggesting interpretations, ordering elements, and proposing relationships and emphases" -- all of which can be assimilated and utilized by an audience who, reciprocally, accords the reviewers a "particular authority" as "official readers."[90]

Given this dynamic, the initial querulous, contrary reviews which greeted *Porgy and Bess* cannot be dismissed when exploring and interrogating the fluid nature of the "melting pot" opera and the heated controversy it incited within both the opera and musical theatre arenas. Further, the opinions, interpretations, and mediations asserted and inscribed by *Porgy*'s "official readers" may be seen as "dust" which has settled upon the opera's historic records; and as time has passed, this residue has become part of the work itself, informing/determining reception and perception of the opera. Regarding this paradigm, theorist Antoine Vitez affirms that any such dust "fundamentally transforms" an object or work; and "even if the text remains completely intact [. . .], we can no longer read it in the same way as those readers for whom it was written."[91]

In 1935, *The New York Times* sent both its chief music critic, Olin Downs, and drama critic, Brooks Atkinson, to cover the Broadway opening of *Porgy and Bess*. Downs' review was lukewarm, overall; but he liked some aspects, including the songs. He took issue with the blending of musical styles, however, writing: "He [Gershwin] has not completely formed his style as an operatic composer. The style is at one moment of opera and another of operetta or sheer Broadway entertainment."[92] Downs also felt Gershwin had not "utilized all the resources of the operatic composer."[93] Atkinson, on the other hand,

lauded the production, stating that Gershwin "had found a personal voice that was inarticulate in the original play."[94] Atkinson's praise was not without caveat, however; for he disparaged Gershwin's use of recitative, writing: "Why commonplace remarks that carry no emotion have to be made in a chanting monotone is a problem [. . .] -- this deluge of remarks that have to be thoughtfully intoned and that annoyingly impede the action. Why do composers vex it so?"[95] But, the thorniest criticisms and insults were slung by Virgil Thomson.[96] This powerful music critic and composer had nothing positive to say about Gershwin's work, which he deemed to be derivatively culled "straight from the melting pot." Thomson further groused:

> His [Gershwin's] efforts at recitative are as ineffective as anything I've heard [. . .] -- little exercises in the jazz-modernistic style, quite cute for the most part, but leading nowhere. The scoring is heavy, over-rich and vulgar. It is nervous, too, like the whole musical texture [. . .]. *Green Pastures*, the last act of *Run, Little Chillun*, and *Four Saints in Three Acts* are all little eminences on the flat horizon of American opera [. . .]. Two of these are straight folklore. The third is straight opera. *Porgy and Bess* [. . .] is not straight anything. It is crooked folklore and halfway opera, a strong but crippled work.[97]

Notably (and tellingly), Thomson accorded his own work (*Four Saints*) the distinction of being the only "straight" opera on the list. His opinion, however, flew in the face of contemporary Lawrence Gilman's assertion that Gershwin considered *Porgy* to be opera and, therefore, "the music critics present will surely agree with him."[98] In actuality, however, even some friends and colleagues were discomfited by the hybrid nature of *Porgy*. In *Memoirs of an Amnesiac* (1989), Oscar Levant recounts his own conflicted feelings: "At the first performance of *Porgy and Bess*, I naturally squirmed a little; I had been a Schoenberg pupil, and there were so many song hits with Broadway endings. I turned to critic John V.A. Weaver [. . .] and said, 'It's a right step in the wrong direction.'"[99]

Race also played a major role in the initial mixed reviews which greeted Gershwin's opera, especially in regards to readings proffered by the African-American "interpretative community." Ralph Matthews, music critic for *Afro-American*, claimed that *Porgy* was neither opera, musical comedy, nor

drama; and its music was, most certainly, "not Negro."[100] Matthews elaborated, criticizing the classical opera treatment of the African-American subject matter: "The singing, even down to the choral and the ensemble numbers, has a conservative twang. Superimposed on the shoddiness of Catfish Row, they seem miscast."[101] Duke Ellington agreed that the African-American story did not seem well served by or suited to the "European" opera genre, writing: "The music does not hitch with the mood and spirit of the story. It does not use the Negro musical idiom. [. . .] It was grand music and a swell play, but the two didn't go together."[102] It seems that the "melting pot" character of the opera, in terms of race (along with genre), disturbed many critics who did not like their "boundaries" or "categories" blurred or confounded. In this same vein, Stark Young in *The New Republic* most simplistically suggested that the overall "trouble" with *Porgy* may have been that it was "neither black nor white."[103]

Stage Authority/Authorship -- Formative Interpretations by Directors and Producers

In addition to an initial reception paradigm of controversy/confusion incited and compounded by reviewers within the music and theatre arenas, public perception of *Porgy and Bess* may have been influenced and confounded by early directors and producers who somewhat molded or manipulated the work to suit their own interpretations. For its original 1935 production, Theatre Guild hired Russian immigrant Rouben Mamoulian as stage director. The choice was a fitting one, for Mamoulian's career actually paralleled the work which he would be directing. He was an opera/theatre hybrid, having come to Rochester, New York, as director of George Eastman's National Opera. He then achieved his first major Broadway success in 1927 with Heyward's play *Porgy*. As Gershwin stated, "He [Mamoulian] knew opera as well as he knew the theatre and he was able to bring his knowledge of both to this new form."[104] Indeed, Mamoulian imprinted this "hybrid" sensibility on his production of *Porgy and Bess*. Further, his past association with the play version could not help but suggest a theatre/Broadway foregrounding for the opera, even before it was staged. By all accounts, Mamoulian's original production was laden with theatrical stage action, much of it intricately choreographed to dramatically enhance the songs; and this elaborate staging may have contributed to a "musical theatre" reading of *Porgy*, suggesting the construct/aesthetic of Broadway musical "numbers," as opposed to the stationary, isolated,

song-reverent treatment given opera arias at the time. For instance, in "I Got Plenty o' Nuttin," Mamoulian embellished the libretto by inserting background milieus and movement which included synchronized dice games, chores (e.g., bedding being shook from windows), street jobs, even soap bubbles blown by children. A crowning touch had several unoccupied rocking chairs move in rhythm to Porgy's singing.[105] It is important to note that many of Mamoulian's "musical theatre" adjustments were made autonomously and authoritatively; in this regard, he somewhat "authored" a version of *Porgy* neither indicated nor originating in the libretto or score. For instance, he interpolated a "specialty number" for vaudeville star John Bubbles (Sportin' Life) which somewhat subverted the operatic continuity of composition asserted by Gershwin. Further, as a powerful member of the original production team, Mamoulian has often been cited as a primary force behind many of the score's initial cuts, implemented in order to appeal to a potential Broadway audience. Yet, in other ways, he seemed especially sensitive to the musical structure and character of the work, often claiming adherence to Richard Wagner's theory of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, that is, Wagner's advocacy of an ideal music/text/movement archetype in which the three components are integrated, interdependent, and interactive. One significant *Porgy* episode is recounted by Hamm as follows:

> He [Mamoulian] instructed the cast to "regulate your movements by the rhythm and character of the music at the moment." [. . .] For one of Porgy's moments with Bess (in the wake scene), he wanted a gentle swaying movement from her as they sit back to back on the floor. Bess's movement was too vigorous, however, and Mamoulian aided her by saying, "You're the accompaniment, not the melody. What we want here is an obbligato."[106]

Although Mamoulian put his individual imprint of hybridity on *Porgy and Bess*, imposing modest "musical theatre" modifications which contributed to the overall mixed perception of the work (including confusion and/or consternation regarding its "opera" classification), he nonetheless tried to work within the opera genre in order to realize Gershwin's "serious music" objective.[107] This would not be the case, however, with the more popular revival of *Porgy and Bess* in 1942 by producer Cheryl Crawford.

Although the production's stage direction was formally credited to Robert Ross, Crawford was the force behind the considerable reconfiguration of the opera -- much of it shaped and altered to fit a conventional (and profitable) musical theatre mold. One significant casualty was Gershwin's "blue" recitative. *New York Times'* Sidney M. Shalett wrote in 1942 that Crawford "always thought that it [recitative] was just a lot of artificial padding."[108] Therefore, she proceeded to make the elimination of the recitative one of her main objectives, along with other changes to reduce the size (and cost) of the opera. She enlisted the services of Alexander Smallens who had been the musical conductor of the original production; Alpert recounts their collaboration: "Smallens agreed to take on the musical responsibility if the recitatives could be eliminated in favor of spoken dialogue. [. . .] In justification, he cited Mozart, Weber, and Beethoven as having used spoken words instead of recitatives." Ultimately, "through reorchestration," Alpert notes that Smallens and Crawford were able to reduce the number of musicians from forty-four to twenty-seven, while also cutting the size of the cast.[109] In short, Crawford's "opera" was packaged as a much more intimate theatre piece -- more reflective of Broadway in scope and sound -- with dialogue between its "songs." Most important, after opening on Broadway at the Majestic Theatre, the 1942 revival ran for 286 performances -- a much more successful box office than the original 1935 production (which closed after only 124 performances). Therefore, in terms of public awareness and assessment, Crawford's version could not help but dictate and inscribe a "musical theatre" reading of *Porgy* -- a reading that would persist for years to come.[110]

After Crawford, the next formative producer/director to shape and, somewhat, "author" *Porgy and Bess* (while again paradoxically confounding its genre placement/constitution) was producer/director Robert Breen. Working with fellow producer Blevins Davis, Breen produced and directed a revival of the opera for ANTA (American National Theatre Academy); the production ran from 1952 to1956 and was sponsored by the State Department as part of its federally chartered culture-sharing project. As part of the project, Breen's version toured the United States before arriving on Broadway (305 performances at the Ziegfeld Theatre); then, as a tool of cultural outreach (and propaganda), his production was staged for select audiences in Western and Eastern Europe (including the Soviet Union). Thus, Breen's *Porgy*

reached an international audience, both inciting and renewing interest in and interrogation of the work. Further, as *Porgy*'s audience widened, its interpretation on stage became even more paramount in forming opinions and community readings; while its director, Breen, was most instrumental in reviving a paradigm of theatrical confusion regarding the work's operatic construct and aesthetic. Specifically, Breen was not a fan of opera, once stating, "I'd rather just listen to it without being bothered by the cluttering up of perfectly good theatres with it."[111] In addition, he claimed that he was "not selling it [*Porgy*] as an opera but as a theatre piece." If *Porgy* had to be labeled, Breen preferred the term "musico-drama."[112] Indeed, he not only sold the work as a musical drama, but configured his production to meet the definition. Monod notes that Breen's version emphasized theatrical realism and dramatic immediacy: "He kept scenes short and fast moving and he allowed no breaks or crescendos after familiar numbers to prevent the applause he knew would shatter the illusion of reality."[113] Breen also condensed the three-act libretto to two acts, with cuts, revisions, and displacement of some musical numbers. Significantly, Breen's revised libretto was the only officially published version until the opera received its "restored" stagings and recordings in the 1970s. All of this may sound somewhat dire for the "opera" aspect of *Porgy*; however, as noted in a 1953 *New York Times* review, Breen also "restored a great deal of the music that characterized [*Porgy*] as opera,"[114] including much of the recitative.

Lastly, Breen also subverted the contradictory reception given *Porgy* in the past by creating a new "official reader" paradigm. Aware of previous mixed reviews by theatre and music critics and considering his version to be more theatre than opera, Breen implemented a strategy whereby he staged the first performance in every city for an invited audience of theatre people and drama critics. Music critics then received tickets for the following day's opening. Alpert notes, "As a result, the main body of reviews came from the drama critics, and they were sensational. The steam was taken out of the music critics, and, in fact, they received little space for what was already yesterday's news."[115] Thus, the initial reviews of *Porgy*, proffered and disseminated by an "interpretative community" of theatre experts, received more acclaim, exposure, and, consequently, validation than those submitted by the "secondary" opera community; and accordingly, a "theatre" reading for *Porgy* prevailed for decades.

Geography -- It's All about the Territory

As the aforementioned directors and producers can be credited with inciting and informing the fluid perceptions and negotiations of *Porgy and Bess*, the same can be said for the sites of their formative productions. Specifically, in the field of receptivity, there exists another force behind the reading of any creative work: the venue. Carlson posits that "the physical environment" of any performance can provide "one of the richest and most significant aspects of the theatre event aside from the performance itself."[116] Further, in regards to site/venue, Carlson references the work of theorist Umberto Eco and summarizes his architectural semiotics theory:

> A specific architectural object may be considered a sign, and like any sign, is composed of a meaning (a signified), which in this case is the function fulfilled by the object (a space for dwelling, for worship, etc.) and something standing for that meaning (a signifier), which in this case is a building tied to that function by traditional cultural codes.[117]

Given this reception model, an "opera" may be cited/sited as a "musical" due to its locale or venue -- in other words, the "when in Rome" principle may be reinterpreted as "when housed in a Broadway theater." Any specific Broadway site becomes a text layered with a potent history (i.e., its previous housing of musicals) as well as its association with neighboring musical productions, signifying to its readers a "musical theatre" connotation and definition, regardless of a present work's actual constitution. In this regard, Carlson cites Kenneth Lynch's *The Image of the City* (1960), asserting that "districts" of cities or "relatively large areas with some common characteristics" are also employed to "make sense" of a "metropolitan text."[118] Accordingly, the "Broadway" district can be viewed as an urban text signifier, providing a defining framework for its communities of readers. Mark N. Grant reiterates and reinforces this position; specifically, he prefaces his book, *The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical* (2004), with the assertion that "any musical show produced after 1866" in the district designated as "Broadway" is predominantly considered to be "a Broadway musical." He expounds: "The operative assumption is that patrons of theaters [. . .] who go to see an opera like *La Bohème* [. . .] at a Broadway

theater understand that they have seen a 'Broadway' production and not an opera house [. . .] version. *Venue is definitive of perception and reception.*"[119]

Per this argument, one cannot escape the fact that much of *Porgy and Bess*' "identity crisis" may be due to its early performance venues, that is, Broadway and regional theatres as opposed to prestigious opera establishments. As Alpert states, "Opera was supposed to be presented at an opera house. *Porgy and Bess* had been performed in a Broadway theatre, and the tendency was to judge it by the standards of Broadway."[120] Yet, *Porgy* was always deemed by Gershwin and his collaborators to be a work most suited to the "legitimate" opera house. Why, then, was this venue not the site of *Porgy*'s premiere? A myth has grown up around the original production which asserts that it was to be initially produced by the Metropolitan Opera but was pulled by Gershwin when he learned that they planned to do the production in blackface.[121] Gershwin's own explanation somewhat disputes this story: "The reason *I did not submit* this work [*Porgy*] to the usual sponsors of opera in America was that I hoped to develop something in American music that would appeal to the many rather than to the cultured few."[122] Accordingly, Peyser reports: "Why would he [Met director, Otto Kahn] support the commission of an opera that would inevitably contain echoes of Broadway? The chances are that he did not, for no letters about *Porgy and Bess* between Gershwin and the Met have come to light." This is not to suggest, however, that race played no role in *Porgy*'s venue; for Peyser also posits that it "was highly unlikely" that the Met "would consider mounting an opera about blacks. Not a single black was singing there at the time."[123]

Thus, *Porgy*, sired by opera, was birthed on Broadway. This hybrid, liminal work was produced by Theatre Guild and premiered at Broadway's Alvin Theatre; and both conditions made it all the more difficult for critics and audiences to define and reconcile the new breed -- termed an "opera" but sited as "theatre." The commercial significance of this paradigm also stigmatized the work; for it somewhat suggested that the "Art" of opera was cheapened for the sake of commerce, "selling out" for a populist, profitable home on the Great White Way. (This sentiment also hearkens back to America's "high art/low art" bias, specifically suggesting a binary of "highbrow/elitist" opera versus "popular/commercial"

musical theatre.) Greenberg writes that "in signing the Theatre Guild contract, Gershwin was highlighting the improbability of any successful collaboration with the Metropolitan Opera. [. . .] He knew that a Met production would only result in a few performances during the season. If successful, the Guild could keep an operatic *Porgy* running nightly on Broadway."[124]

The Met could have eased some of these tensions by giving *Porgy* its "official" opera sanction, but this did not happen for years. Breen asked the Met to provide its "opera house" venue for the opening of his revival, but he was rebuffed. To this, he angrily retorted, "We know very well indeed that if *Porgy and Bess* did not require Negro personnel, the Metropolitan would have long since acquired the rights for its repertoire."[125] The Met then consented to house the ANTA production for a limited run, but it could not work around the dates set for the State Department's diplomatic engagements in Vienna and West Berlin. In the end, Breen's company went to Europe, and the Met never acknowledged that it had been passed over. However, the European tour of Breen's production did much to legitimize the "opera" moniker for *Porgy*, as it was mostly designated and acclaimed as "opera" in Western and European cultural centers, playing major opera houses throughout the tour. Most significant was its overwhelmingly positive reception at Milan's historically elite and harshly judgmental opera house, La Scala. Richard Coe recounted the audience reaction in the *Washington Post*: "Cheers ran out from the topmost of the six tiers, and when the cast appeared at its [the curtain's] rise, the audience came to its feet yelling and applauding."[126] In short, Europe was seemingly quicker than the United States to accord *Porgy and Bess* operatic status; from 1965 to 1969, it was added to the repertoires of the most prestigious and exclusive European opera houses, ultimately premiering at East Berlin's Komische Oper in 1970.

In the end, however, *Porgy* found a home on America's "legitimate" opera stage. It may have been a long time coming, but fifty years after its debut, *Porgy* finally played the Met. And true to the "high art"/opera bias in the States, as well as the signifying import of venue, Greenberg refers to the 1985 Met premiere as *Porgy*'s "canonization."[127] Media reviews of the Met performance did much to incite and propagate this reading; for example, *New York Times* critic Donald Henahan wrote that the "uncut" Met production "took a grand opera approach to a work that until recent years has been treated as a Broadway

musical;"[128] while Douglas Watt, in *Daily News*, applauded the Met version for having finally "realized the magnificence of the work."[129] Canonization, however, is neither an easy mission to accomplish nor a light load to bear. In the Met's efforts to inscribe "opera" on *Porgy* and somewhat rigidly bind it to the classical specifications of the genre and expectations of its readers, it may have drained the work of some its lifeblood, i.e., a pulsing vitality due to the "melting pot" tensions, contradictions, and negotiations that constitute the work. Specifically, once *Porgy* finally debuted at the Met, there arose of chorus of contrary voices who felt the opera was miscast and robbed of a crucial dynamism, specifically grousing that some Met singers (cast according to the Met criteria of vocal virtuosity and professional rank) were too old for the roles. Furthermore, many agreed with Peter G. Davis' assessment in *New York Magazine* that the production, with recitatives and original material intact, "lurches, staggers, and finally collapses under the burden of its own respectability."[130]

And in the End -- Contemporary Resistance and Possible Reconciliation of Fluidity

In 1985, Met music director and orchestra conductor James Levine authoritatively claimed *Porgy and Bess* to be a great operatic work which "has everything great opera has, great music, great drama, and a psychological and social milieu that is as involving as the milieu of *Don Giovanni* or *Boris Godunov*."[131] This stamp of approval and accreditation may have been long overdue, but by the 1980s, it seemed to represent the majority opinion. A significant turning point on the road to this contemporary sentiment was Houston Grand Opera's revival of *Porgy and Bess* in 1976 -- the first major revival to include all material cut from earlier productions. The Houston Opera production played on Broadway for four weeks and, once again, incited discourse within opera and theatre arenas. Significantly, however, much of the controversy which had initially surrounded Gershwin's work seemed somewhat abated this time around; in fact, there appeared a growing consensus that it was "acceptable" that opera be reconfigured/redefined as an evolved, hybrid (and, therefore, open) "new form," i.e., opera as high art, entertainment, musical theatre, folk-art, black, Jewish, ... Instead of wide-spread consternation over *Porgy*'s fluid nature, a new level of recognition and excitement surfaced regarding the potential suggested by a "melting pot" opera. For instance, in his *New York Times* review, Clive Barnes wrote that the 1976

revival offered a “kind of re-evaluation of what Gershwin really meant” in terms of an amalgamated form of opera;[132] while *New Republic*'s William Youngren claimed: "[The restored work] brought me to the conclusion that *Porgy and Bess* is not only Gershwin's finest work, but is also a fine opera."[133]

This is not to suggest, however, that issues of “opera” classification and legitimacy ceased to foreground and inform reviews of the Houston Opera production. As cited above, the persistent referencing of these issues in almost all media reports signified the extent to which *Porgy* could not escape the stigma, complexity, and potency of its amalgamated and fluid paradigm. Further, not all members of New York’s “interpretive community” validated and/or applauded Houston Opera’s Broadway staging. In the *Times*, chief music critic Harold C. Schonberg reiterated many of *Porgy*’s past criticisms in a scathing review which accused the opera of being "commercial, slick, and sentimental." He maintained that the work was mainly comprised of “some pretty songs, connected up by a libretto full of stereotypes, with a phony and sentimental ending that makes a cheap assault on the emotions, and by music that has no connective tissue at all." Lastly, he dusted off a past racial criticism and laid it back on the table, declaring *Porgy*’s score to be "white man’s music, not the real thing."[134]

Importantly, Schonberg's negative assessment and argument did not garner much support within the critical community. Although many conceded that the work's hybridity was troublesome, they also asserted that the whole, given its constitution of disparate and conflicting components, was an invigorating and challenging experiment and triumph, exceeding boundaries of race, ethnicity, culture, and genre. By 1982, Clive Barnes was inspired to proclaim, "It [*Porgy and Bess*] has always been regarded – quite wrongly – as simply a Broadway musical. It was always something much more, and indeed a pointer to the future of both the Broadway musical and opera itself.” In conclusion, Barnes declared the classical opera genre, overall, to be “deader than a dead dodo [. . .] a fossilized art, the preserve of interpreters rather than creators,” while extolling *Porgy* as an emergent, potent example of both “grand opera and grand popular entertainment.”[135]

Barnes’ overall sentiment may not be fair to the many great classical works in the opera canon, but it does suggest a newfound respect for a work (and overall paradigm) that resists "either/or"

parameters and classifications, engaging a more inclusive, complicated, and liminal dynamic. Further, such an assessment not only affirms the hybrid potential of *Porgy*, but also opens artistic doors to valid explorations and exploitations of the work's openness and complexity. Accordingly, some of today's most significant contemporary artists have purposefully reintroduced and re-incited the opera/musical conundrum of *Porgy and Bess*, playing with and pushing its liminal, ludic genre boundaries, further complicating readings of the work. One of the most telling examples is the recent attempt by Trevor Nunn to bypass the "opera" argument altogether and authoritatively (given his status in the theatre community) reconfigure *Porgy* as musical theatre. His production of *Porgy and Bess: the Musical* premiered on November 9, 2006, at the Savoy Theatre in London. Importantly, the work was neither positioned nor billed as Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* (not even as a revisionist revival). Instead, working with the Gershwin estate, Nunn completely rewrote the libretto, using dialogue from the original novel and stage play to replace the recitative. Also, instead of using trained opera singers in the production, he cast former daytime television stars as leads. Due to a weak box office, the musical was deemed a failed experiment and closed shortly after opening. Some might see this venture as a bold effort to finally force *Porgy* into a defined genre position. Others might see the failure of the production as proof that such an undertaking was a "fool's errand," a futile effort to contain a fluid entity, while possibly muting the power of its hybrid, resistant, and subversive nature.

Thus, it seems that *Porgy and Bess* may continually and consistently be framed and informed by confusion, consternation, and contradiction in regards to its canonical place or status within the opera genre. Yet, should such confusion, consternation and contradiction stigmatize or undermine a work that has *never* conformed to a subjectively prejudiced and authoritatively influenced/mediated paradigm of genre acceptance and acquiescence? In answer, I would say "no" and suggest that *Porgy* provides the opportunity to perpetually invigorate the opera genre by resisting and negating traditional strategies of artistic accreditation and constriction by "expert" readers. In addition, I reject any assessment of *Porgy* which simplistically positions and reconciles the work as a "grand" exemplar of opera/entertainment symbiosis. Instead, I acknowledge and applaud the ambiguity and fractiousness which fittingly surround

and inform a work that, concordantly, is characterized, complicated, and energized by a confounding, contentious constitution. Further, such a constitution bears witness to a broader paradigm as it reflects a defining, yet destabilizing and challenging, component of American society, culture, and politics: the ubiquitous, ambivalent "melting pot" ideal, itself. Specifically, while *Porgy* may be said to represent a "melted" art form, one may also find, in its example, the paradox and peril inherent in such an "absence" of definers and strictures. Further, when unpacking the contemporary potency and relevance of *Porgy and Bess* as a "melting pot" signifier, we ignore at our own academic peril the concordant paradox of America's embrace (at least, in word) to the "melting pot" concept alongside its discomfort, resistance, and mediation in the face of the true "melting pot" phenomenon of liminality/fluidity.

In terms of identity (whether it be construction of "whiteness" or high art versus low art), there persists a need of the Other. In theory, a liminal space and entity, such as a "melted" society, culture, race, ethnicity, and/or art form, may serve as a Utopian ideal, one ripe with potentiality. Yet, in reality, the absence of the Other evokes consternation and confusion, refusing to provide, and often subverting, reliable signposts for an audience and populace dependent on and desirous of concrete delineators and boundaries. One of the most potent exemplars of the "melted" model within the United States is the mulatto, a racial mix which has, throughout history, proven to be troubling and transgressive in the American "politics of identity." As a poster child for the "melted" paradigm, one could reasonably position *Porgy and Bess* as the mulatto opera (in terms of authorship-cum-constitution). Coincidentally, the same year that *Porgy* debuted on the Broadway stage, Langston Hughes (1902-1967) chronicled America's seeming inability to reconcile racial fluidity. In the tragic drama *Mulatto* (1935), Hughes' protagonist, son of a white plantation owner and black housekeeper, is not accepted in white society or black; ultimately, he strangles his father in a release of repressed rage and commits suicide to find "rest."

Such chronicles of "fluidity" angst are pervasive in American literature and social commentary. A contemporary of Hughes and one of this country's most renown mulattos, W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963), also wrote of the paradigm and paradox throughout the early and mid 1900s, poetically speaking of his own "two-ness" as "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one

dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."[136] In accord with the "melting pot" ideal, however, Du Bois also advocated for "the unifying ideal of Race; the ideal of fostering and developing the traits and talents of the Negro [. . .] in order that some day on American soil two world-races may give each to each those characteristics both so sadly lack."[137] An inspiring ideal, to be sure -- a transformative mergence in which, ironically, separatism can ultimately result in a multifaceted, strengthened whole, along with the capacity to travel between, engage, and enrich both races. As this model may more aptly represent a mosaic than a melting pot, both metaphors suggest the negation of absolutes and confining delineators; further, both ideals (in terms of race, as well as ethnicity, genre, and art) are suggested by *Porgy and Bess*. But, as illustrated in this article, such archetypes are often conflicted and such aspirations are often met with resistance and mediation, if not outright hostility. For instance, in his well-publicized feud with Du Bois, fellow journalist, publisher, and black activist Marcus Garvey angrily denounced Du Bois as "a white man's nigger" and "a mulatto ... a monstrosity."[138]

In a similar vein, *Porgy and Bess*' long tenure in the opera canon has continually been informed by resistance and opposition in regards to its "melted/mulatto/mosaic" character. In this respect, the work illustrates the ongoing discomfort with or need to define/confine true "melting pot" signifiers and phenomena; for today, gray areas continue to be subjectively delineated, mediated, and, consequently, pigeonholed in American society, politics, and culture. Self-described as a "mutt," Barack Obama represents a recent manifestation of this paradigm. As a young college student, "Barry" Obama reclaimed his given name, Barack -- a move that was later chronicled by many in the media as Obama's rejection of his "whiteness" and, in a sense, his taking of racial sides, proclaiming his "blackness" and Otherness in America. Such mediation by pundits and consumption by the public framed Obama's name-change as a resistance to the "melting pot" potential of hybridity and a reinscription of race/identity politics and differentiation. Yet, Obama, himself, has often claimed that he has never sought to delineate between black and white, but acknowledges and embraces his multi-racial heredity and makeup. As stated in his 2008 "race" speech, aptly titled "A More Perfect Union," Obama avowed that he could never "disown" his black or white heritage, stating: "These people are a part of me. And they are a part of America, this

country that I love."[139] In this refrain, Obama seemingly reasserts the legacy and ideal of the American melting pot. Still, Obama is oft-cited as the first "black" American president, not the first "mulatto" president; thus, polarities and binaries seemingly persist in today's society and culture.

This is not to suggest, however, that such strictures are not continually confronted and confounded. And in this respect, *Porgy and Bess* gives glimmers of hope as to a place of liminal acceptance, negotiation, and celebration -- a unique distinction for a musical work. As this black/white/Jewish/high/low/opera/musical enters the 21st century, it brings with it a rich "dusting" of past tensions, confusions, paradoxes, and rebukes in its embodiment of an American "melting pot." Crucially, however, as the discussions and dissections (as well as performances) of this uniquely American construct/aesthetic persist, the surrounding discourse also suggests how far we have come in our ability, as a populace and audience, to recognize, embrace, and engage the power and potential of the fluid realm. In short, if readers are forever puzzled by *Porgy and Bess*, while "experts" are forever driven to define, conform, and constrict the work (however futile their efforts may be), *Porgy*, itself, will most likely be the benefactor, growing in stature and import while representing one of America's most vivid, reflective examples of catalytic liminality in opera. Furthermore, *Porgy* may serve an even greater purpose as its inclusive, incendiary paradigm extends to other arts and arenas, asserting and reinscribing the potential to blur and confound boundaries while reflecting the American "melting pot" in all its wonder and strain, its fluidity and friction.

Notes

[1] Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: William Morrow, 1967), 104.

[2] Quoted in Rodney Greenberg, *George Gershwin* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998), 195.

[3] *The King's Henchmen*'s tragic tale of romance and honor was written by Edna St. Vincent Millay, while Taylor provided his own adaptation of the George du Maurier novel for *Peter Ibbetson*.

[4] *Jones*' closing aria (and only aria) uses a simple song quotation/interpolation from James Weldon Johnson's first book of spirituals: "It's a-me, oh, Lawd, standin' in the need of prayer."

[5] Indeed, the performance of the score was innovative in terms of its environmental, impressionist "sound and fury." For example, in the Met production of *Jones*, an orchestra of African drums circled the stage, extending to the sides of the opera house. As the drums aurally replicated the panicked, accelerated heartbeat of Jones, a chanting, yelling chorus also underscored and heightened the protagonist's physical/psychological trauma.

[6] Elise K. Kirk, *American Opera (Music in American Life)* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 181.

[7] Ibid., 182.

[8] Donald Jay Grant and Hermine Weigel Willams, *A Short History of Opera*, 4th ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 733.

[9] Quoted in Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 537.

[10] Joplin's original 1915 orchestrations have never been recovered; but in 1970, Joplin's piano-vocal score was rediscovered. Thus, after sixty years, the work finally received full-scale performances -- first, in 1972 as a joint production by Morehouse College and Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and then, with Gunther Schuller's reorchestration, by Houston Grand Opera in 1975.

[11] Maureen Needham, "*Kykunkor, or the Witch Woman*: An African Opera in America, 1934," in *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*, ed. Thomas F. DeFrantz (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 233.

[12] Ibid., 248.

[13] John Martin, "*Kykunkor*, Ritual Drama, Given by Native Artists," *New York Times*, 13 May 1934, 6.

[14] W. J. Henderson, "Native African Opera Moves," *New York Sun*, 21 May 1934, 18.

[15] Upon founding the Hall Johnson Negro Choir in 1925, both Johnson and his choir became renowned through participation in Marc Connelly's *The Green Pastures* (1930) on Broadway, as well as numerous acclaimed tours and film engagements.

[16] Quoted in Grant and Williams, *A Short History of Opera*, 735.

[17] Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahit (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1982), 22-23.

[18] Marvin Carlson, *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 12-13.

[19] Quoted in Greenberg, *George Gershwin*, 193.

[20] Quoted in Hollis Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess: The Story of an American Classic* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 118.

[21] David Horn, "From Catfish Row to Granby Street: Contesting Meaning in *Porgy and Bess*," *Popular Music* 13, no. 2 (1994): 166.

[22] Quoted in Horn, "From Catfish Row to Granby Street: Contesting Meaning in *Porgy and Bess*," 172.

[23] Horn, "From Catfish Row to Granby Street: Contesting Meaning in *Porgy and Bess*," 172.

[24] Quoted in Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess: The Story of an American Classic*, 118.

[25] Deena Rosenberg, *Fascinating Rhythm: The Collaboration of George and Ira Gershwin* (1991; reprint, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 314.

[26] Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess: The Story of an American Classic*, 113.

[27] George Gershwin, "The Relation of Jazz to American Music," *American Composers on American Music*, ed. Henry Cowell (1933; reprint, New York: Frederick Unger, 1961), 186-187.

[28] Ray Allen, "An American Folk Opera? Triangulating Folkness, Blackness, and Americaness in Gershwin and Heyward's *Porgy and Bess*," *Journal of American Folklore* 117, no. 465 (2004): 254.

[29] Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess: The Story of an American Classic*, 102.

[30] David Monod, "Disguise, Containment and the *Porgy and Bess* Revival of 1952-1956," *Journal of American Studies* 35, no. 2 (2001): 297.

[31] Quoted in Greenberg, *George Gershwin*, 193.

[32] Allen, "An American Folk Opera? Triangulating Folkness, Blackness, and Americaness in Gershwin and Heyward's *Porgy and Bess*," 249-205. Emphasis mine.

[33] Ibid., 254.

[34] Quoted in Allen, "An American Folk Opera? Triangulating Folkness, Blackness, and Americaness in Gershwin and Heyward's *Porgy and Bess*," 251.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid., 244.

[37] Quoted in Greenberg, *George Gershwin*, 194-195.

[38] Quoted in Joan Peyser, *The Memory of All That: The Life of George Gershwin* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 221.

[39] Peyser, *The Memory of All That: The Life of George Gershwin*, 221.

[40] Quoted in Greenberg, *George Gershwin*, 194.

[41] Greenberg, *George Gershwin*, 194.

[42] Quoted in Monod, "Disguise, Containment and the *Porgy and Bess* Revival of 1952-1956," 306.

[43] Hall Johnson, "*Porgy and Bess*: A Folk Opera," *Opportunity* (January 1936), 25-26.

[44] Ibid, 28.

[45] It is important to note that Duke Ellington was not a disinterested party at this time. He had started composing a black opera titled *Boola* in 1930 which he never completed. Possibly, there existed some personal disgruntlement at Gershwin's success with *Porgy*.

[46] Quoted in Greenberg, *George Gershwin*, 196.

[47] For example, in Nunn's version, Porgy used crutches instead of being depicted as a lame man on his knees.

[48] Sheridan Morley, "*Porgy and Bess*: Post Mortem," *The Spectator* 269, no. 8571 (1992): 36.

[49] Quoted in Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess: The Story of an American Classic*, 292.

[50] Quoted in Paul Thomason, "The Problem with *Porgy and Bess*," *Opera News* (August 1998), 22.

[51] Rosalyn M. Story, "*Porgy and Bess* at Sixty," *Opera News* (January 1995), 14.

[52] Carlson, *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life*, 14.

[53] Ibid., 24.

[54] Ibid., 15-16.

[55] Peyser, *The Memory of All That: The Life of George Gershwin*, 214.

[56] Ibid., 222.

[57] Thomason, "The Problem with *Porgy and Bess*," 19.

[58] Quoted in Peyser, *The Memory of All That: The Life of George Gershwin*, 249.

[59] Quoted in Thomason, "The Problem with *Porgy and Bess*," 21.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Quoted in Greenberg, *George Gershwin*, 196.

[62] Greenberg, *George Gershwin*, 191. Emphasis mine.

[63] Ibid.

[64] This beginning scene was cut from the original production. It is found in the original score, however; and by 1976, it was restored to the stage version.

[65] Rosenberg, *Fascinating Rhythm: The Collaboration of George and Ira Gershwin*, 280.

[66] Regarding overall operatic continuity and unifying compositional devices, musicologist Charles Hamm offers a contrary assessment, declaring, "To my knowledge, no one has demonstrated that tightly-controlled, large-scale tonal and motivic design was part of Gershwin's *modus operandi*, [. . .] and I can find no evidence of such techniques in *Porgy and Bess*." Charles Hamm, "The Theatre Guild Production of *Porgy and Bess*," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 40, no. 3 (1987): 523.

[67] Rosenberg, *Fascinating Rhythm: The Collaboration of George and Ira Gershwin*, 278.

[68] Ibid., 277-278.

[69] Ibid., 295.

[70] Ibid., 287.

[71] Greenberg, *George Gershwin*, 189.

[72] Quoted in Hamm, "The Theatre Guild Production of *Porgy and Bess*," 505.

[73] Rosenberg, *Fascinating Rhythm: The Collaboration of George and Ira Gershwin*, 278.

[74] Quoted in Rosenberg, *Fascinating Rhythm: The Collaboration of George and Ira Gershwin*, 279.

[75] Quoted in Peyser, *The Memory of All That: The Life of George Gershwin*, 249.

[76] During his *Porgy* period, Gershwin had become a student of Joseph Schillinger. Friend and colleague Oscar Levant credits Schillinger's influence on Gershinw for "the planning of such episodes as the fugal background for the crap-game scene and in some of the choral passages. Schillinger's theories of cyclical harmonic progressions, with an intricate leading of the bass notes, his scheme of rhythmic permutations, extended George's resources considerably." Quoted in Peyser, *The Memory of All That: The Life of George Gershwin*, 242.

[77] Quoted in Peyser, *The Memory of All That: The Life of George Gershwin*, 242.

[78] Ibid., 244.

[79] Ibid., 247.

[80] Quoted in Hamm, "The Theatre Guild Production of *Porgy and Bess*," 507.

[81] Quoted in Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess: The Story of an American Classic*, 112.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Quoted in Peyser, *The Memory of All That: The Life of George Gershwin*, 247.

[84] Hamm, "The Theatre Guild Production of *Porgy and Bess*," 521.

[85] Peyser, *The Memory of All That: The Life of George Gershwin*, 244.

[86] Quoted in Peyser, *The Memory of All That: The Life of George Gershwin*, 246.

[87] Ibid., 250.

[88] Quoted in Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess: The Story of an American Classic*, 293.

[89] Carlson, *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life*, 21.

[90] Ibid., 23.

[91] Antoine Vitez, "Lecture des classiques. Entretien avec Antoine Vitez," *Pratiques*, no. 15 (16 July 1977), 45.

[92] Quoted in Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess: The Story of an American Classic*, 114.

[93] Quoted in Rosenberg, *Fascinating Rhythm: The Collaboration of George and Ira Gershwin*, 317.

[94] Ibid.

[95] Quoted in Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess: The Story of an American Classic*, 115.

[96] Greenberg posits that Gershwin "raided" Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934) for its conductor, Alexander Smallens, and for the singer Edward Matthews (who played Jake the fisherman) which "could not have helped when Thomson sat down to write a particularly nasty review of Gershwin's opus." Greenberg, *George Gershwin*, 181.

[97] Quoted in Peyser, *The Memory of All That: The Life of George Gershwin*, 248-249.

[98] Quoted in Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess: The Story of an American Classic*, 114.

[99] Quoted in Peyser, *The Memory of All That: The Life of George Gershwin*, 253.

[100] Ibid., 252.

[101] Quoted in Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess: The Story of an American Classic*, 122.

[102] Ibid.

[103] Ibid., 118.

[104] Quoted in Hamm, "The Theatre Guild Production of *Porgy and Bess*," 511.

[105] Hamm, "The Theatre Guild Production of *Porgy and Bess*," 511.

[106] Ibid., 509.

[107] After *Porgy and Bess*, Mamoulian would make even more of a name for himself as a Broadway musical pioneer, spearheading the original productions of Rodgers and Hammerstein's landmark integrated book musicals *Oklahoma!* (1943) and *Carousel* (1945). As a result, Mamoulian proved to be one of the most influential and powerful musical theatre directors of the decade (as well as a prominent figure in the history of American musical theatre).

[108] Quoted in Hamm, "The Theatre Guild Production of *Porgy and Bess*," 497.

[109] Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess: The Story of an American Classic*, 136.

[110] It must also be noted that Crawford's revival enjoyed repeated limited engagements on Broadway after its Majestic Theatre run -- one in 1943 (24 performances) and another in 1944 (64 performances). Thus, her shortened "musical theatre" production became the dominate version/interpretation of *Porgy* during the 1940s.

[111] Quoted in Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess: The Story of an American Classic*, 152.

[112] Ibid., 202.

[113] Monod, "Disguise, Containment and the *Porgy and Bess* Revival of 1952-1956," 286-287.

[114] Quoted in Hamm, "The Theatre Guild Production of *Porgy and Bess*," 497.

[115] Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess: The Story of an American Classic*, 202.

[116] Carlson, *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life*, 42.

[117] Ibid., 43.

[118] Ibid., 47.

[119] Mark N. Grant, *The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 8. Emphasis mine.

[120] Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess: The Story of an American Classic*, 5.

[121] Gershwin's stipulation that *Porgy*'s cast be African-American (excepting the few white characters) has remained an integral condition of theatre performance maintained by the Gershwin estate.

[122] Quoted in Rosenberg, *Fascinating Rhythm: The Collaboration of George and Ira Gershwin*, 272. Emphasis mine.

[123] Peyser, *The Memory of All That: The Life of George Gershwin*, 234-235.

[124] Greenberg, *George Gershwin*, 171.

[125] Quoted in Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess: The Story of an American Classic*, 160.

[126] Ibid., 203.

[127] Greenberg, *George Gershwin*, 196.

[128] Quoted in Hamm, "The Theatre Guild Production of *Porgy and Bess*," 497.

[129] Quoted in Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess: The Story of an American Classic*, 325.

[130] Ibid.

[131] Ibid., 319.

[132] Ibid., 303.

[133] Quoted in Rosenberg, *Fascinating Rhythm: The Collaboration of George and Ira Gershwin*, 319.

[134] Quoted in Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess: The Story of an American Classic*, 307.

[135] Ibid., 319.

[136] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1903), 3.

[137] Ibid., 13.

[138] Quoted in Colin Grant, *Negro with a Hat: The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey and His Dream of Mother Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 56.

[139] Barack Obama, "A More Perfect Union," *The Huffington Post*, 18 March 2008, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/03/18/obama-race-speech-read-th_n_92077.html (accessed October 15, 2009).